

席夏
記事
SISIA'S JISHAS

毒藥



公華 | First Song

We never had a choice since the beginning.
For things that have been lost in the past,
The future is only left with this option.
We live in the past, without future,
With only vengeance.....

Yu Wo
Author



Kang

Hua

First Song:

Abandoned Flower

Lu Ma



Disclaimer

Yu Wo holds the copyright to this work. Giraffe Corps does not own anything. However, we have received personal permission from Yu Wo to translate this work.

This is a fan translation and is absolutely for free. We do not make profit off of this. On our website, you may see a donation button. We ask for donations to buy the original Chinese raws so that we can continue to translate. The money does not go into our own pockets.

Redistribution of this PDF is not allowed. This PDF is for personal use only, not for commercial use. Please do not steal this translation or try to make profits off of it. If this work is officially licensed in English, all distribution of this PDF must cease.

Lastly, please support the author by buying a copy of the original work, if possible. Thanks!

About Giraffe Corps

We giraffes started running across the grass on *November 11, 2011, 11:55*. We hold cakes in one hand and English words on the other. We pride ourselves with our far-fetching neck and vision. We believe they will aid us in spreading the love of Asian novels to the English speaking creatures.

We like cookies too.

Group Anthem

I write allegiance on the flag of the Giraffe Corps of Languages, and to the Giraffe for which it reads, on group, Giraffe Corps, translated, with sunglasses and cookies for all.

Credits

Translators

Ayanora
Kaitlin
Namejanai
Nannyn
Nuddle
Yihn
Yumeruhime

PDF

Nannyn
PiKairi

Proofreaders

Attroquinineblue
BGa9
Happyfatty
MagenKumquat
Nannyn
Natas
Nuddle
PiKairi
Pinkbarracuda
Pumpkin_so77
Sae
Sherry
Snowstorm
Syrra

SISHA

YI SHUANG

BOWADUN

Central
Rockies

DASHI

LINLAN

LANXIADOU

ZHANYAN

DUDA

QIFENG

Leviathan Desert

Zhan's Old
Plains

YUEHU

ZUGANG

Battle
Bay

Sea of Sisha

JUNDE



XIASHA

ORIGINAL
FOREST

Deadland
(Desert)

EAST
ISLANDS

angxia
Gates



MOUNTAIN



FORESTRY



DESERT



CITY



HARBOR



GATEWAY

东花

Contents

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Prologue..... | 8 |
| Chapter One..... | 14 |
| Chapter Two..... | 31 |
| Chapter Three..... | 41 |
| Chapter Four..... | 56 |
| Chapter Five..... | 75 |
| Chapter Six..... | 83 |
| Chapter Seven..... | 93 |
| Chapter Eight..... | 106 |
| Chapter Nine..... | 117 |
| Chapter Ten..... | 129 |
| Afterword..... | 140 |

Prologue

"Just who are you?"

I am... a Flower.

Flowers aren't like you. Flowers can't move, can't talk. You...

I can move. I have walked past countless moons.

I can see. I have seen vast fields and oceans.

I can talk. I speak of love, hate, and vengeance.

But, I am still a Flower.

The Leaf Tribe was leaving the mainland.

They were this continent's last branch of Leaves. Concealed in the high mountain's forests, they were carefree and happy. Now, they had to travel across a different ocean and head towards a different land. This was because the Spirit Tree they had always relied on had grown too old, too old... It was dying.

With no choice, they had to escape to another continent. There, other branches of Leaves were willing to welcome their kindred. They had a Spirit Tree that was strong enough to support this branch of refugee Leaves.

The Leaves began to prepare for their journey. Some started to make boats in the forests near the shore. Some started learning the techniques to navigate across the oceans. Some started gathering food and drinks.

In order to travel and land safely on the new continent, everyone was working hard to gain knowledge as much as they could. They knew their Tree was about to die. To survive, they had to learn everything as quickly as possible. Although, "quickly" referred to time as long as a human's whole lifespan.

The Tree had about a hundred years before its death, so it allowed enough time for the Leaves to leave their home village.

A hundred years might feel long, but for the migration of an entire species, to the ten thousands of Leaves who would soon cross unknown oceans, a hundred years didn't seem enough. Leaves had a life expectancy of nearly a thousand years. Their pace of living had always been unhurried.

In this busy time period, the fading Tree blossomed, probably for the last time. It bore only a single, black flower.

The Leaves didn't like the Flower.

As a vibrant and colorful race, the Leaves had refined and exquisite appearances. Their eyes and hairs ranged in beautiful hues of lime, azure, silvery-purple, luminous gold, orange, and many others. No matter the color, their hair was full of luster and vibrancy.

On the other hand, the Flower possessed pure black hair and dim red eyes. Both colors were bleak and dreary, as though they were reminders of the Tree's imminent end. That was why the Leaves disliked the black Flower. They refused to accept their Tree's approaching death.

Aside from its colors, the Flower's growth was also abnormal. Usually, Flowers could speak after ten years, could run wild after twenty, and after thirty years, Flowers could fully utilize their given powers.

Flowers were the children of Trees, the Leaf Tribe's guardian. They could control any plant to protect the Leaves.

But that Flower couldn't do anything; he couldn't even walk. He had taken steps before, but after that, he could always be found curled up under the Tree, shrouding his face with that long, messy, black hair. The Flower didn't watch, listen, or do anything... he didn't even speak.

Although the Leaves didn't like the Flower, they did not bully him. The kindhearted species wouldn't do something so cruel. They only continued to gather knowledge of the seas, biding their time until the moment to leave. They neglected the Flower.

Attached to their homeland, the Leaves waited and waited, until the evergreen Tree suddenly began to turn red and yellow. The changes dismayed them, but they finally understood that it was time to go.

Their Tree was on the verge of death.

This time, reality sunk into every Leaf's heart.

The lord of the Leaf Tribe sternly announced that all Leaves must vacate the area. By the year's end, the last ship would leave the shores, and any Leaf not on board would be left behind.

After his announcement, the Leaves finally started transitioning, slowly yet certainly.

Around this time, the Flower finally stood. He left the shades of the Spirit Tree to follow the Leaves, waddling unsteadily with each step. He was unaccustomed to walking, so he walked very slowly. He gradually drifted from the head of the crowd to its middle, and then lagged to its end.

Eventually, he had to walk behind the last Leaf in line. The Leaf had silvery-purple hair, which made him easy to recognize in the forest. The Flower looked at his hair and followed him. Even if that Leaf left the others, the Flower would most likely follow.

The Leaf with silvery-purple hair occasionally looked back at the Flower. Although he didn't like the Flower either, he couldn't bear it.

He was still their Flower.

This Flower was supposed to be their pride, their treasure, and their most powerful guardian.

But the Tree was dying, and they had to leave.

They could not take the Flower with them. That was why, since the Flower's birth, no one had dared to look at him... He was a Flower destined to be abandoned by them, so how could they?

Countless large ships sat afloat on the clear ocean surface. All these white and gray ships were handmade by the Leaf Tribe. The ones coated in vivid colors were sent from the other continent to welcome them.

The silvery-purple haired Leaf stopped in his steps and lifted his head to look at the waters. The ocean was covered with ships. All the Leaves on board were looking at him... as well at the Flower following him.

The silvery-purple haired Leaf hesitated for a moment, but still turned around to face the Flower. That was the first time he looked so carefully at the Flower. Although the Flower's hair was black, he had a body of fair white skin. Paired together, the colors were not as dreary as he had imagined. The contrast was rather eye-catching.

The Flower might possess astonishing power... but the Leaf couldn't think this way, nor could he take a liking to the Flower. Because they were about to abandon him.

The Leaf tried his best to suppress his expressions and only apologized, "I'm sorry, so sorry, but you cannot follow us onto the ship."

The Flower only looked at him with a pair of dim red eyes.

The Leaf avoided the Flower's gaze and said with his head hanging slightly, "My name is Yin Qie Zi. If you, if you are safe and well in the future... please come to the Continent of Jun De and find us."

The Flower continued to look at him. The Leaf didn't know whether the Flower understood him or not.

"Lord, are you boarding now?"

Yin Qie Zi turned around and saw two Leaves walking down from the ships. He nodded his head and asked, "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, we can depart now."

"Then let us go."

After he finished speaking, Yin Qie Zi wanted to turn around and look at the Flower. However, he stiffened and ultimately did not turn back. He only continued to walk ahead with the other two Leaves.

The Flower also walked a few steps. Yin Qie Zi and the other two Leaves stopped and wrinkled their brows at him, yet none of them wanted to tell the Flower to stop. They walked towards the ship once more, and the Flower followed once again. The Leaves stopped in their footsteps...

After this motion repeated itself for a few times, it appeared the Flower finally understood. He watched Yin Qie Zi and the other two get on the ship, but did not follow anymore. He only stood at the ocean coast, his eyes following Yin Qie Zi.

When the Flower finally stopped, all the Leaves gave a sigh of relief. If the Flower followed them onto the ship, they wouldn't know what to do.

Should they beat or yell at him? Force him to leave?

But it was the Flower's job to always be near the Leaves. How could they penalize him for doing what he was supposed to do?

The Flower stood at the ocean coast, and widened his eyes to look at the Leaves on board the ships. He spoke.

"Why do you hate me?"

Almost all the Leaves on the decks were looking at the Flower. Yin Qie Zi felt especially horrible, because the Flower wasn't looking at anyone else, but rather, directly at him.

They were all curiously surprised to see the Flower opening his lips. However, they were too far away and couldn't tell whether words were coming out of the Flower's mouth.

But that was no longer important, because their Tree was dying.

If the Tree that had given birth to a Flower died, then the Flower would follow suit and become insane.

A Flower gone berserk was extremely dangerous.

The Flower stood there in a daze for a long, long time. Now, not a single ship was left on the water's surface.

The Flower's job was to stay by the Leaves' side and protect them, but there weren't a single Leaf left, so he didn't know what he was supposed to do anymore. Thus, he only stood by the coast, vacantly watching the ships float farther and farther away.

In the end, children longed for their home, and so the Flower began to miss the Tree. He began to walk towards his home, to where the Tree was.

Although now, there weren't any Leaves left to escort him on his trip home.

The Flower never had any contact with the world outside the Leaf Tribe. He didn't know that the Leaves were a powerful existence when in a group, and that was why no one dared to harm a crowd of Leaves. However, the road was much more dangerous than imagined when he was alone.

Poisonous plants weren't considered dangerous to Flowers, and no plants would harm Flowers. At the same time, Flowers didn't eat plants either.

Many wild beasts had targeted the Flower before, but they could detect that he wasn't an ordinary prey. After approaching a certain distance, they would naturally leave.

Thus, to the Flowers, the most dangerous things in the whole forest were humans.

Humans fancied the Leaves' beautiful appearance and would often capture them as home decorations and toys.

After walking for only a few days, the Flower encountered a group of adventurers. Everyone in it was human. The adventurers heard that the Leaves were migrating away, and wanted to try their luck at any Leaf that had been left behind. If they could catch even one Leaf, it meant a large sum of money would have already landed in their pocket.

They didn't happen upon any Leaf, but rather found a Flower.

They rejoiced, thinking they had found a Leaf, and captured him. Soon afterwards though, they dubiously looked at the creature and wondered... just what was it?

The Leaves looked slightly different from humans, but there were still similarities. At least, the general outer appearance was the same. The Leaves' hair and eye colors were just more vibrant, their bodies slenderer, and their faces more alluring.

The Flower was different. He was naked, yet features that discriminated his sex couldn't be found. His appearance was that of a fifteen-year-old girl or an even younger boy. He didn't even have nipples, something both males and females should have. There weren't any sex organs below either, and not a strand of hair could be found on his body. All he had was a luscious black mass of hair on top of his head.

At first glance, the Flower's black hair didn't appear to be anything special. Yet on closer inspection, the hair strands' movement looked odd. As there wasn't any wind, his hair looked like it was floating naturally on its own.

The adventurers were a bit startled and astounded, but since the Flower looked harmless, their panic quickly disappeared. Thus, they captured the Flower, pretending his hair's movements never existed.

The Flower's appearance wasn't exceptional and could only be called delicate at best. Plus, he didn't have any sexual features, which gave humans nothing to play and toy around with.

Eventually, the Leaf Tribe's treasure—the Flower, tumbled into a circus troupe. He was locked in a cage while crowds after crowds of humans jeered and laughed at this sexless freak.

In reality, the Flower didn't mind it much.

He didn't understand the human language. He missed his home a little and wanted to return to the big shade under the Tree... But he remembered that there weren't any Leaves left around now, and thus, was not in a hurry to go back.

At least by staying here, there were still some humans around. Although the environment made his mood a bit grim. Only when the troupe was moving to another location could he see a ray of sunlight. The horrid environment made him feel a bit cold, a bit tired, a bit hungry... but all of this was still within a tolerable extent.

The circus people brought various foods for the Flower and saw that it touched nothing but water. As the Flower didn't die of hunger, the circus men were elated to know that they could save on food costs. From then on, they didn't try to bring any other food and left only a bucket of water inside the cage. They would refill it only after a long time.

The days passed one by one, but the Flower didn't have a sense of time. He only sat inside the cage, thinking about the Tree, about sunlight, about clean water, about the departing Leaves, about the Leaf with silvery-purple hair...

Until one day, a strange feeling suddenly wafted through the Flower's whole body.

Pain!

Amid the immense pain, he suddenly understood. His home had died... the Tree had died.

The Tree was far away, but the Flower couldn't withstand the immeasurable pain. It drove him mad. His head of black hair writhed wildly like snakes... He lifted his head and screamed towards the sky.

Masses of wood skewered the surface, piercing through the metal cage, through the circus' tent, through all the horrified crying humans.

Thick vines squirmed across the ground and destroyed all obstacles blocking their way. The vines crushed carriages, the city, everything...

When the Flower was conscious again, the area had become a decimated wasteland. With blackish-red liquid dried on his pale body, the Flower appeared eerily shocking. His hair no longer waved from the clotted blood... He was so full.

So full that he wanted to throw up.

So full, yet so empty. There weren't any living creatures to be found. The Flower was alone yet again.

Chapter One

Flower, Gong Hua... Gong Hua

I thought I had escaped from the cage.
Afterwards, I realized, I had only stepped into a larger cage.
No matter what I did, there was no way I could escape from it.
This cage known as hatred.

—Gong Hua

The Flower lumbered out of the mangled cage.

Still a little disoriented, he didn't know where to go. However, he didn't remain puzzled for long and began to stride slowly in the only direction he knew of... his home, the Tree.

He walked at a snail's pace, as his stomach was uncomfortably bloated. Earlier in his berserk rage, he had consumed gobs and gobs of blood. As it wasn't water, he was unaccustomed to it. He simply ate too much.

After walking for a while, there seemed to be a group of people chasing him. The Flower halted his steps and turned around to look.

By then, the Flower had already recognized this race—Humans. These people rode on beasts. It wasn't the first time the Flower had come across humans sitting atop of them. He once wondered why humans would choose to ride beasts instead of walk. After some observation, however, he more or less understood. Animals were faster than men, and some beasts could tow extremely hefty objects.

The men sitting on top of the beasts wore a thick layer of...“rock.” The Flower seldom saw anything like it and didn't quite understand what it was. He could only treat it as rock for the time being.

Besides their garments, the men also waved “rocks” of different shapes in their hands.

Sparkly and pretty, they were probably decorations, the Flower thought.

The humans leapt off their beasts and carefully approached the Flower. After closing in a certain distance, they surrounded the Flower and raised the rocks in their hands, pointing them at him.

The Flower cocked his head and stared. He imagined that these men wanted to cage him again.

One human slowly walked into the barricade. Mesmerized by his movements, the Flower gazed directly at him. The man walked towards the Flower and stopped about three steps away.

The man was quite tall, and the Flower had to arch his head to look at the other's face. That man also lowered his head and returned the gaze. For a while, there was no movement. Then, the man suddenly retracted the glistening stone he held in his hand and untied the enormous object slung over his shoulder.

The Flower recognized this object. Humans were always wrapped in it. Except, this object looked different on every individual human, just like the varying petals on different flowers.

It was then that the Flower suddenly recalled. The Leaf Tribe also used to wrap themselves in objects, but what they used were various tree leaves, furs, or feathers. They would fasten a vine around their waists and occasionally hung flowers or pretty stones from it.

However, the objects that were wrapped around the humans were not leaves. The Flower didn't know what they were called and could only refer to them as petals.

Just then, the man slung that huge "petal" over the Flower's body and carefully tied a knot. He even inspected it meticulously to make sure the petal was secure and wouldn't slide off.

The Flower was amazed. It felt soft, indeed like a petal. It might be a petal from a flower he had never seen before.

However, even if it really was a petal, flowers didn't exchange petals with each other. Thus, the Flower didn't understand why the human would drape his petal over his body.

The human then opened his mouth and sputtered a chain of sounds. However, the Flower didn't understand and only continued to stroke the "petal" on his body. He really liked the touch of this "petal."

Witnessing this, the man scratched his head, seemingly perplexed. Then, he stretched his hand and pointed at himself, continuously uttering a string of words, "Zhan · Owen · Paladin, Zhan · Owen · Paladin..."

The Flower finally understood, this man was Zhan · Owen · Paladin.

"Zhan · Owen · Paladin," the Flower carefully enunciated the human's name. He mimicked the man's action and pointed to himself while saying "Flower" in the Leaf Tribe's language. After he finished, he thought for a moment and further explained, "Male Flower¹."

Destined to be abandoned since birth, the Flower had not been given a name. The only thing he had left was his identity and gender.

The way to differentiate a Flower's gender vastly differed from that of other species. On appearance alone, males and females looked about the same. Neither of them had sex organs nor nipples. Other than the strands on their heads, not a single hair could be found.

¹ (公花): It's pronounced as Gong Hua. 公 (Male/Father/Husband) and 花 (Flower). When Gong Hua refers to himself, he calls himself "Flower" (Hua 花).

However, the female's physique was generally stronger than the male's, as she held the responsibility of raising children.

Nature had always worked this way. Giving birth to an offspring was vital. Hence, the female who could reproduce needed to be the stronger gender.

The human Zhan · Owen · Paladin furrowed his brow and tried to pronounce the same words the Flower spoke. "Gong Hua?"

The Flower tilted his head, yet he did not deny the way the man addressed him. He understood that the other party's language was different and pronouncing the name in the exact tone would be difficult. The "Zhan · Owen · Paladin" he uttered might not have been the correct pronunciation either.

Zhan · Owen · Paladin spoke again. Upon noticing a lack of response, he simply lifted the Flower and walked to the beast he previously sat on.

The Flower was startled. When Zhan · Owen · Paladin sat him on the beast's back, he stroked the beast out of curiosity. Zhan · Owen · Paladin followed suit, when he jumped onto the beast's back, he also gave it a few strokes. He then pulled on its rein, so that the beast would start running.

The Flower turned to sense the Tree's location. Only then did he realize that the beast was taking him in a completely different direction. He turned towards Zhan · Owen · Paladin, and the latter smiled. He said a word Gong Hua didn't understand and then uttered "Gong Hua."

Because of Zhan · Owen · Paladin's smile and the apparent kindness he emanated, the Flower did not jump off of the beast. Gong Hua was a Flower that had been left alone for fifty years. Between a smile and a lifeless Tree without Leaves, the former appeared much more attractive.

The beast dashed at blazing speed, and before long the Flower realized he had returned to that small town, the town he had obliterated.

A pungent, rusty smell wafted in the air. That smell formerly made the Flower feel so bloated that he wanted to retch. The only difference now was that a rotting stench also hung in the air. The Flower could not stand it anymore. He leapt off the galloping animal. The force of his movement propelled him across the ground, making him roll around.

Once he stopped rolling, he knelt on the roadside and started to gag. But nothing came out. The blood, consumed days before, could no longer be vomited.

Zhan · Owen · Paladin walked behind the Flower. He was confused; for a second, he didn't know what to do. After inspecting the Flower's four limbs and making sure there weren't

² Gong Hua (公華): 華 is an old variant of 花 and could mean flower, magnificent, or splendid. 公 could also mean one of the five orders of feudal nobility. The exact meaning of this name is unclear. So far, we know it is a mispronunciation by Owen.

any grave injuries, he gently patted the Flower's back. He hoped that would make him feel better.

The Flower certainly felt better. He stopped hurling and turned back to look at Zhan · Owen · Paladin. He hoped that the man would smile at him.

He didn't smile. The man stared worriedly at the Flower with his brows creased into a frown. However, the Flower still felt unexpectedly comforted after staring at the other's expression.

When he saw that the Flower was no longer vomiting, Zhan · Owen · Paladin once again lifted the Flower and strode away with large steps.

Just then, the Flower finally turned his attention to his surroundings. A lot more people had appeared in the town's vicinity, as well as more triangular objects.

There had been many of such triangular objects in the circus. Every time the circus relocated, the first thing they did was set up these triangular objects. There were gigantic ones big enough to allow crowds to squirm within, and there were smaller ones with only enough space for his cage, allowing only a few individuals to enter at a time to gawk at him.

The Flower took a long time in understanding that humans used these triangular objects as mobile homes. Zhan · Owen · Paladin brought him into a tiny triangle, which was so small it wouldn't even be able to fit the cage that had once imprisoned him. When they entered, there was already a person present. Zhan · Owen · Paladin exchanged a few words with that person before he placed the Flower on the floor, smiling at him before leaving.

The Flower watched Zhan · Owen · Paladin leave and his heart sank. He felt upset; even though it wasn't the first time he had been left behind.

Just then, the person who remained suddenly stroked the Flower's head. When the Flower spun around, the person pointed to herself just like Zhan · Owen · Paladin and continuously reiterated, "Mila."

Afterwards, she would point to the Flower voicing, "Gong Hua," before pointing to herself again saying, "Mila."

The Flower understood. This person wanted him to call out her name. The Flower pointed his finger towards the human and said, "Mila."

After he did, that person revealed a glowing smile. Upon seeing her smile, the Flower followed suit.

At that moment, two men emerged from the outside, hauling a barrel filled to the brim with water. They placed it down and subsequently left.

Mila brought the Flower to the barrel. She ran her fingers through the water, making ripples on its surface.

The Flower was confused. Did Mila want him to drink the water? But he had eaten too much a few days ago and didn't have the appetite for anything. Moreover, he didn't like

steaming water and had even less need for such a big barrel of it. The barrel could conceal him completely.

Mila shoved the Flower and pointed to the barrel.

The Flower somewhat understood. Did Mila want him to enter the barrel?

The Flower disliked hot water, yet he didn't wish to see Mila disappointed. She smiled at him. Thus, he stepped into the barrel. The moment his feet dove into the water, Mila pushed his shoulders down, making him sit. The action caused the water to rise past his shoulders.

Mila took off the big petal draped on the Flower's body. She then grabbed a small petal, grinning as she wiped the Flower's face with it. She then pushed the petal into the Flower's hands.

The Flower could somewhat understand her action. After Mila used the tiny petal to wipe his face, the foul odor somewhat faded. It appeared that the combination of water and a tiny petal could remove the stench on his body.

Once he understood this point, he immediately used the tiny petal to scrub his hair, where it reeked the most.

Upon observing the Flower's actions, Mila knew he understood. Smiling broadly, she started to walk out.

The moment the Flower saw Mila leaving, he immediately halted his scrubbing and shouted, "Mila!"

Mila spun around, staring at him curiously, with a smile still on her face. At that point, the Flower began to understand. Whether it be Zhan · Owen · Paladin or Mila, they had not abandoned him. They were only leaving for the time being.

Mila walked to the side of the barrel and caressed the Flower's head, murmuring incessantly. Although she knew that the Flower wouldn't understand, she still talked to him for a long time in a gentle voice before leaving.

Understanding that Mila and Zhan · Owen · Paladin would return, the Flower felt reassured and continued to scrub his body with the petal. The hot water felt less annoying now.

Not long after, Mila indeed returned, holding a stack of petals in her hands. She pushed those petals to the Flower and uttered a few words.

The Flower stared at the petals, and then raised his head to look at Mila.

Mila spoke again, spread the petals, and pointed to herself. When the Flower did not react, she gave a strained smile. She put on the petals piece by piece, and then took them off, demonstrating the action to the Flower repeatedly with utmost patience.

The Flower stared at Mila's actions with immense curiosity. Mila ceaselessly put on and peeled off the pieces of petals. She wore two small petals first, attaching each to the upper and lower body. She then took a large petal, putting it on headfirst, then wrapping herself completely from neck to knee.

The Flower understood. He stood up, wanting to try wearing these soft petals as well. However, before he could try on the petals, Mila turned to grab another large petal and began to wipe his damp body.

That petal sponged away the water beads on his body. By then, Mila had also pulled the Flower out of the barrel. Mila grinned at him before stuffing the other petals into the Flower's arms. She then turned around with her back facing the Flower.

The Flower imitated Mila's movements and wore the petals one by one. He first attempted the small white petal, which had two holes for him to poke his legs through; he pulled that up to his waist. He then slipped his head through a slightly larger white petal and stretched his arms out of the two holes on the side. The largest blue petal came last; he slipped his head through it and cast out his arms. The only difference between the blue and white petal was that the blue one was much larger, covering the Flower to his knees.

After putting on his clothes, the Flower immediately tugged on Mila's arm excitedly. He wanted Mila to see him with the petals on.

Mila turned around, smiling as she caressed the Flower's head. The Flower recoiled immediately. The action was too intimate and made him feel slightly embarrassed.

Yells traveled from outside the triangle. The Flower heard them. Mila heard them as well. The latter hollered back towards the sound, and Zhan · Owen · Paladin subsequently walked in. He was dazed upon seeing the Flower and soon broke into a smile.

The Flower mimicked him, widening the corners of his lips to reveal a huge grin. This made Zhan · Owen · Paladin smile even more, from ear to ear. He walked forward and stuffed a soft, downy object into the Flower's hands. Its color resembled that of soil.

The Flower sniffed at it, discovering that it smelled great and was soft. Was it a petal as well? He had never seen a soil-colored petal and was thus fascinated by it.

Mila and Zhan · Owen · Paladin started to converse, but the Flower could not understand their words. All he could do was play with the soil-colored petal.

Mila turned her head around, and grabbed the petal with one hand, tearing off a piece of it.

"Ah!" The Flower was stupefied. The petal was actually torn!

Mila stuffed the torn fragment into the Flower's mouth. This startled him even more. He held it in his mouth, confused about why Mila would stuff a petal into his mouth.

Mila smiled and turned back to talk to Zhan · Owen · Paladin.

Amidst listening to Mila talk, he recognized a familiar sound, Owen... but only "Owen." Mila did not say "Zhan · Owen · Paladin."

"Owen?" The Flower glanced at Zhan · Owen · Paladin, puzzled. Was he called "Zhan · Owen · Paladin" or was it simply "Owen?"

Zhan · Owen · Paladin heard the Flower. He spun around and answered with a smile, "Gong Hua."

He also mentioned something else after his name, but the Flower couldn't understand. He pointed at Zhan · Owen · Paladin and asked, "Owen?"

"Owen."

The Flower repeated it. He preferred Owen to Zhan · Owen · Paladin, as the former was shorter. In contrast, Owen liked to call him "Gong Hua" instead of just "Hua."

How weird, Owen actually preferred longer names. But that didn't matter, as long as he liked it.

"Gong Hua," the Flower nodded. He would remember his new name—Gong Hua.

Owen beamed a bright smile at Gong Hua and resumed his conversation with Mila.

While they spoke, the two sneaked glances at Gong Hua, but the latter was oblivious. His was focused on the petal in his hand and the ones on his body. He played with them, discovering that they were two completely different things.

Occasionally, he would raise his head out of curiosity to peek at Owen and Mila. If their eyes met, Owen or Mila would smile at him. This incited him to raise his head more regularly. He anticipated the next time their gazes would meet and the smiles that would follow.

However, the two soon finished their discussion. Owen flashed another smile at Gong Hua before he left.

Mila turned around, stretching her hand to tear a piece off the petal in Gong Hua's hand. She stuffed it into Gong Hua's mouth while smiling at him. She said a few words to him and then followed Owen out of the tent.

After Mila left, Gong Hua spat out all the petals in his mouth. He checked the direction of the Tree again but still didn't want to leave. Compared to the Tree without Leaves, he preferred to stay with Owen and Mila.

And with his stay, a month soon passed.

During the whole time, Gong Hua and Mila stayed together. Often, Mila would teach Gong Hua a little of the human language and. She was surprised to find out that Gong Hua had exceptional memory. Whatever she had said, no matter how insignificant, Gong Hua would remember it.

In only a month, Gong Hua could name almost every item in the human language.

However, he still struggled with sentence structures.

Sometimes, Owen also visited the Flower, but he seemed busy and always left as quickly as he came. Even then, he never forgot to bring little gifts for Gong Hua. Most of the time, they were tidbits and sweets. However, Gong Hua never ate them. He stored these objects in a bag Mila gave him and would occasionally take them out for a whiff.

Gong Hua might not eat them, but he enjoyed the fragrance the sweets emanated.

Mila still brought him the soil-colored petals every day. No! It was "bread." He now knew that the object was called bread. Bread was actually a type of plant seed ground into

powder, and then baked into a type of product for consumption. It served as staple food for the humans.

At first, Gong Hua adamantly refused to eat the bread. After a few days, however, Mila's face crumpled with worry as she handed him the bread. Tears then began to well up in her eyes when Gong Hua didn't eat.

At the sight of Mila's tears, Gong Hua eventually bit down on the bread and reluctantly swallowed it. Mila was then able to smile through her tears. However, only after he finished the entire bread did she feel relieved enough to leave.

The moment Mila left, Gong Hua immediately ran to an isolated corner and vomited everything out. His stomach could not digest the bread. Despite having to force himself to eat and vomit two meals every day; despite having to stay near the town he wreaked havoc in; and despite having to tolerate the putrid stench still penetrating the air even now...

He didn't want to leave.

"Gong Hua?"

Gong Hua spun around as Mila frantically rushed over. Upon seeing him vomit all over the floor, she panicked and was on the verge of crying.

Concerned, Mila lightly patted Gong Hua's back and asked, "What is it? Is your stomach upset from the bread?"

Gong Hua shook his head.

"You don't like eating bread?" Mila asked hesitantly.

Gong Hua shook his head. He only drank water. Naturally, he would dislike bread.

Mila knitted her brows, but upon seeing Gong Hua's stare, she quickly smiled and said, "Okay, should I bring you other types of food tomorrow?"

Gong Hua still shook his head. He only drank water.

The following day, Mila brought a bowl of soup filled with meat and vegetables... However, her long blanket of hair had disappeared.

Gong Hua stared at her head dumbfounded. Mila initially had long curls the color of sunflowers; they were extremely vibrant. Whenever he followed Mila around, humans always fixated their gazes on her hair.

"Come, drink some soup." Mila wore a bright smile and passed the bowl to him.

Gong Hua took the bowl and stayed silent for a moment. For the first time, he started to eat things without vomiting.

After Mila coaxed Gong Hua to sleep, she could not help but turn back a few times, burdened with worry. When she confirmed that Gong Hua was lying well in his bed, she finally peeled open the tent door and walked out. She had only taken one step before abruptly

colliding with a black figure. Startled, she stepped back and recognized the person she had bumped into. Breathing a sigh of relief, she murmured, "Owen."

"How is Gong Hua?" Owen stepped forward, feeling a little pained as he glanced at Mila's hair. He asked again, "Has she³ eaten?"

Mila nodded her head and informed him. "She finally ate something and didn't vomit this time."

"That's good." Owen frowned with his eyes fixed on the tent. "Such a worrisome child."

"You're really that worried?" Mila chuckled as she spoke, "At first, you kept nagging me, saying I was too fond of the child and that 'You can't do this, you can't raise every orphan you find.' My ears nearly grew calluses from your incessant bugging."

"That..." Owen was rendered speechless; he couldn't come up with an answer even after thinking for a while. He only scratched his head and said, "Even if I don't raise her to adulthood, I can't let her starve to death."

"If you like the child, then say it. Why can't you just admit it?"

Mila rolled her eyes, when she saw how Owen had awkwardly stiffened, she stopped interrogating him. She turned her gaze towards the tent Gong Hua was sleeping in and sighed. "That child really is different. She has nothing, can't speak, yet doesn't make a fuss. It's as if she doesn't want anything."

Mila intentionally casted a sideways glance at Owen and mumbled bitterly, "Of course. There's nothing odd about your liking Gong Hua. She has delicate features and is a very attractive girl."

"What nonsense are you talking about?" Owen panicked and spluttered. "Gong Hua is still a child. I saw it clearly that day. Her chest hasn't even developed..."

"You saw it clearly that day? Hmm?" Mila narrowed her eyes into menacing slits.

Owen's jaw dropped as he frantically tried to explain himself. "She, she wasn't wearing anything that day! Even then, my eyes didn't roam anywhere! Moreover, her hair covered most of her body, and you obviously know, I, I... the person I like is you! We have, for so long... Mila, you have to trust me!"

Idiot! Mila burst out laughing and said, "There, there! I was just joking."

"You shouldn't joke about something like that!" Owen spoke, feeling a little wronged. "It's not like I'm a pedophile, why would I like Gong Hua? She's younger than me by at least fifteen years!"

Grinning, Mila shook her head and explained. "Gong Hua is certainly not a child, she was probably just born with a small chest. She looks about fifteen or sixteen, only younger than you by about ten years!"

³ Gong Hua is male. But because he doesn't have any distinguishing sexual features and a delicate appearance, he gets mistaken for a girl a lot.

"Sixteen? Doesn't that make her an adult?" Owen's mouth dropped open in complete disbelief. He asked, "That can't be, can it? Her, her figure looks about twelve... Arghh! I only took a small glance."

Mila shot him a disdainful look and muttered, "It's because you're too tall, so you didn't even notice that Gong Hua is actually taller than me. I measured her height, and it's 170 cm! How can that be the height of a twelve-year-old?"

"That tall?" Owen was blown away by surprise. "There are girls that tall?" According to his impression of women, girls were all supposed to be small and petite.

After hearing his words, Mila hesitated. She had seen Gong Hua naked, although never clearly. The mass of hair always hid her body. However, it seemed that that child didn't have nipples... Nonetheless, they weren't appropriate to mention to a man. Mila simply could not muster the courage to discuss nipple problems with Owen.

"No matter what, that child is simply too odd." Mila said distraught with worry, "Look at her. In the beginning, she couldn't even speak!"

"She could be suffering from trauma," Owen explained. "There are many people who get scared into aberration upon witnessing frightening events. Not to mention, this town had been reduced to a bloodbath! Gong Hua's entire body was soaked with blood. She probably witnessed the entire massacre."

Upon hearing Owen's explanation, Mila fell silent. She wasn't an easily frightened person. As military personnel following the army, bloody scenes weren't uncommon. But this town could not simply be described as a bloodbath. It was completely decimated; the infrastructure was reduced to rubble, there were even houses half buried in the ground.

Despite mobilizing a team of thirty people and a month of excavation, they were still digging corpses out from deep beneath the earth.

What exactly had happened in this town?

Was it a natural disaster? An earthquake?

An earthquake would be the most plausible explanation, but anyone who had seen the remains would feel that something was amiss. Half of the houses were embedded in the ground, and many people were encased in deep soil instead of rubble. The ground surface was inexplicably flat, scarred with longitudinal marks. It was as if some enormous creature had slithered through the town.

People who had passed by this town couldn't accept an earthquake as the explanation. However, no one could offer any alternative insight.

The town wasn't near the sea or the mountains. Hence, it couldn't be a flood or a landslide. Other than an earthquake, what other plausible explanation could there be? Was there even "anything" that could bring about such destruction?

Mila felt a chill down her spine. If the "natural disaster" were to befall the town once more, would the team be able to withstand it? She couldn't help but tremble at the thought.

"Don't be afraid, you still have me, unless I die." Owen picked up on Mila's emotions and squeezed her hands lightly. His thick, callused hands comforted her, but his words made her so embarrassed that she hid her face by looking at the floor.

Behind them, another hand also emerged, startling the two of them. They simultaneously turned around, and then broke out into smiles.

It was Gong Hua!

They had no idea since when Gong Hua had been standing behind them. She had even latched his hands on theirs. Her expression was somber, as she was attending a solemn ceremony.

Mila grabbed Gong Hua's hand and chided, "Gong Hua, why aren't you asleep?"

Hearing Mila's words, Gong Hua raised his head and replied honestly, "I was listening to your conversation."

"Ah..." Mila said a little apologetically. "I'm really sorry. We shouldn't have talked outside the tent. The noise must have woken you up."

Gong Hua shook his head to show he didn't mind. He then asked curiously, "Owen, Mila, why do you put your hands together?"

The moment he posed the question, Owen and Mila exchanged quick glances. However, they shifted away again when the eyes met, their faces turning pink.

"Mila, your face is red." After Gong Hua finished speaking, he discovered something new and exclaimed, "Owen, your face is red too! Why do faces turn red?"

Mila's face flushed even harder at Gong Hua's words. In turn, Owen cleared his throat loudly and raised his voice, "Seriously! Kids shouldn't ask so much. Go to sleep, quickly! Be good, and I'll bring you out to play tomorrow."

Go out and play? Gong Hua couldn't fully comprehend the meaning of "play," but he understood that it meant Owen would come visit him tomorrow. He immediately spun around and asked, "Will Mila come and play too?"

"That..." Mila hesitated. Owen was the team leader, so no one would question him no matter where he went. On the other hand, she was merely military personnel. It'd be impertinent of her to take leave without permission.

Owen hurriedly declared, "I'm the leader. I'll let you go on leave... Don't glare at me! I know you care about what others say, but we haven't had a break for so long. Everyone knows you're serious in your work. They won't disapprove!"

Mila glared daggers at Owen, but when she saw Gong Hua's eyes filled with anticipation, she couldn't help but soften her heart and agree.

"Okay! It's only right that we accompany Gong Hua to play. She's still a child after all! Staying in this kind of place from dawn till dusk wouldn't be good for her..."

While speaking, Mila forgot that she had just corrected Owen on how Gong Hua was sixteen and how she wasn't a child. Despite having said that, she still treated Gong Hua as a

child herself. That was because Gong Hua had just learned to speak, and her words all sounded like a child's. Even her actions and manners looked childish, thus no matter her age, Mila could not bring herself to treat Gong Hua as an adult.

"Never go near the town," Owen reminded Gong Hua. "I've told you this many times. Did you obey them?"

Gong Hua nodded his head. He had no desire to step foot near that place. Even though the putrid stench had faded away considerably, the smell still stung. The smell reminded him of the terrifying screams and the rusty, salty stench of blood. He dreaded those memories. So even if Owen didn't mention it, there was no way he would go close to the town.

"There's a lake nearby. Do you want to go there for a picnic?"

Owen and Mila started to discuss their outing for tomorrow. To be honest, there wasn't any place in the vicinity of the town that could be considered fun. The bustling cities were all miles away, and they couldn't travel that far.

"Would it be dangerous?" Mila was concerned. "There seems to be many wild beasts in this area."

"It shouldn't be. Many of the team members had went there before. Even if it's dangerous, there's still me!" Owen thumped his chest as affirmation. "I'm a spiritmancer, you know! I've cleared five levels of chain breaking!"

"What is a spiritmancer-you-know?" Gong Hua immediately questioned, as he pretty much understood nothing. It was exhilarating to make new discoveries every day.

Owen corrected him. "It's not spiritmancer-you-know, it's 'spiritmancer.' Aye! You still can't differentiate between 'you know,' 'is it,' and 'yeah⁴,' can you? Anyways, a Spiritmancer is a very powerful person, and his greatest strength lies in his ability crush 'souls' by breaking chains. We can make opponents fall with just one slash! Your big brother Owen here is a powerful spiritmancer, you know!"

"Don't listen to 'Uncle' Owen's nonsense. A Spiritmancer is just a type of battle occupation!" Mila sighed. She pushed Gong Hua towards the tent while saying, "Okay! It's late now. Gong Hua, you should go to sleep!"

Gong Hua was completely baffled. Spirit? Spiritmancer? Breaking chains? Battle? Occupation? He wanted to continue with his questions. But when Mila deepened her tone, there was no way he could go against her. He could only obediently do as she said.

"I'll explain tomorrow," Owen winked at Gong Hua.

Gong Hua grinned and nodded. With Owen's reassuring words, he was finally willing to return to his tent and sleep. Behind him, he could still hear Mila chiding Owen.

"You! Don't explain so many battle terms to a little girl!"

⁴ The actual words used are 喔 (wo), 嗎 (ma), and 呢 (ne) respectively. These are Chinese interjections that are easy to mix up.

"I rarely get a chance to show off! It won't hurt just to let me get a feel for it... Okay, okay! Stop pulling my ear! I promise not to reveal anything horrifying! Arrgh, it hurts!"

While listening to Owen and Mila's voices, Gong Hua obediently laid on his mattress, thinking of tomorrow and where they would go to "play." Even though he didn't quite understand what "play" meant, knowing that Owen and Mila would accompany him was enough...

Without realizing it, Gong Hua soon drifted off to sleep. In his dream, there was the Tree, the Leaves, Owen, and Mila as well.

The moment Gong Hua woke up next morning, Mila hurried him to wash and dress. After he finished, he was forced to sit on a chair, and stuffed with a piece of bread for breakfast.

While Gong Hua gnawed at the bread, Mila grabbed his hair in one hand... He sprang up immediately as his hair strands struggled to break away from Mila's clutches.

Gong Hua firmly shielded his hair with both hands. He was so embarrassed that his entire face went beet red.

Mila held onto the comb, her body frozen. She knew there was something weird about Gong Hua, like the nipple problem, but she didn't imagine that even hair would be an issue!

She had already felt that something was amiss when she touched Gong Hua's hair earlier. Upon her touch, the cluster of black didn't feel like the texture of human hair at all. She was unable to describe how it felt; it was soft, yet not as fine as human hair. Moreover... did those hair strands just move by themselves?

"Gong Hua, your hair..." Mila's voice sounded odd. "Can it move by itself?"

Gong Hua nodded his head.

Mila sucked in her breath and couldn't respond momentarily. She breathed deeply a few times, forcing herself to calm down. She was then able to part her lips and murmur, "Can you make it move a little?"

The moment Mila finished, she saw Gong Hua's hair starting to float. She had to quickly clasp her mouth to prevent an outcry escape from her lips.

Who are you... No, Gong Hua, "what" are you?

Just then, Gong Hua suddenly spoke, "Mila, are we going to play? Is Owen coming?"

"Huh?"

The flustered Mila didn't hear Gong Hua clearly and only turned instinctively to look at him. That one look settled Mila's wave of emotions.

In her eyes, Gong Hua was but a little girl, in fact, Gong Hua's actions were more innocent and pure than ordinary girls. She⁵ was like a child no older than ten. What could be so scary about a girl like that?

⁵ As people are under the impression that Gong Hua is a girl, he will be referred to as "she" when the narration is in their point of view.

Mila grinned and nodded in response, "Mm, we're going out to play. We just have to wait for Owen to come find us."

Gong Hua was delighted, he smiled as he nodded.

Seeing his smile, Mila felt relieved. She even started believing that moving hair wasn't all that strange. After all, Sisha⁶ housed many tribes. It wouldn't be strange if there were people who could move their hair.

Despite that, Mila still carefully instructed the other, "Gong Hua, can you stop your hair from drifting about? It doesn't matter if it's blown by the wind, but you mustn't make it float on its own, all right? Everyone's hair can't move. If yours does, people will realize that you're different from them."

Gong Hua nodded his head obediently. At the same time, he halted the movements of his hair, letting it fall naturally.

Seeing Gong Hua's reaction finally put Mila's mind at ease. Even if she could accept Gong Hua's peculiarities, it didn't mean everyone else could. To avoid invoking fear amongst others, it would be best if no one found out in the first place.

"Come, I'll brush your hair." She beckoned towards Gong Hua.

Gong Hua shook his head, his face red again. He shielded his hair.

Mila was dumbfounded. In that moment, she realized something abnormal about Gong Hua's reaction, and came to a rather embarrassing thought. She hesitated, then asked with a red face, "Gong Hua, when I touch your hair, do you feel something?"

"Yes, it's ticklish, a weird feeling..." Gong Hua muttered softly.

"So-sorry," Mila said sheepishly. "Then, then you'll brush your hair yourself! This hair band is for you to tie your hair. This means you gather your hair to the back of your head, then make a pretty butterfly knot around it..." While she rattled on, she held a brush and hair band, clumsily demonstrating the action to Gong Hua.

Gong Hua nodded his head and took the hair band. He placed this on a tiny strand of hair, which twirled itself around the band and brought it to the back of his head. Subsequently, all the strands of his hair floated to the back, allowing itself to be tied by the hair band. Finally, the band was evenly tied into a pretty butterfly knot. The process, from start to finish, did not require the use of hands and had been done entirely by hair.

What a convenient way of tying hair. Mila was speechless.

She breathed in and cautioned once again, "Gong Hua, if there's anyone around, don't let your hair move about no matter what. Do you understand?"

Gong Hua thought for a moment then asked, "Can I let Owen see this?"

"Not yet. I'll let him know in a few days..."

⁶ Sisha: There are two explanations for this. One refers to the name of the fictional world the author has created; the other means the whole of creation in this world (萬物).

Before Mila could finish, Owen's loud bellows travelled in from outside the tent. "Mila! Are you guys ready?"

"Ah!" Mila suddenly remembered that she herself had not tidied her appearance yet! She blurted in a hurry, "Gong Hua, go out and talk to Owen first. I have to brush my hair first."

"Okay."

Gong Hua agreed. As he stepped out of the tent, he found two other people standing outside.

One was short, and the other was tall. Both shared gentle features, but the taller one seemed more reliable than the shorter one. It obviously had to do with age. The shorter one seemed like a child and looked even younger than Gong Hua, probably only ten or twelve years old.

They should both be "male" right?

Gong Hua could generally differentiate between human men and women now. But he had no idea whether he was considered male or female. Since human women could reproduce, then Mu Hua⁷, the Flowers who gave birth, should also be considered as females. However, human males had more physical power than did the females. This contrasted with the Flowers, whose females were typically stronger. Did that mean human males were the same as Mu Hua?

Gong Hua couldn't comprehend at all. Hence, whenever he found himself wearing a skirt, which was a female garment, he didn't request for a change of clothing. He simply had no idea whether he was a girl or a boy. So he didn't know whether he should be wearing skirts or shorts. But he preferred wearing skirts, as they resembled flower petals more.

Just then, Owen stretched out his hand and gave the man beside him a loud pat on the shoulder. He said, "Gong Hua, let me introduce everyone. This is my team's only spirit charmer, Zhan · Cedric · Tershiziel. The one beside him is his younger brother, Zhan · Cas · Tershiziel."

"Such long names." Gong Hua felt troubled. Owen and Mila sounded much better.

"Zhan · Owen · Paladin isn't that short either!" Cas raised his voice in protest. "What's your full name?"

After hearing Cas' words, Owen and Cedric's faces changed color. They both knew that Gong Hua had trouble even speaking properly. He had also never mentioned his full name. He had probably forgotten it due to the trauma he had experienced.

"What's a full name?" Gong Hua didn't understand. Mila told him before that it was okay to ask questions if he didn't understand.

"A full name is your whole name!" Cas said as a matter-of-factly. "It consists of a word of your country's name, and then followed by your first name, and your surname!"

⁷母花 (Mu Hua). 母 means female/mother/source/origin. The name literally means Female Flower.

“What’s a country’s name and surname?” Even though Cas answered his question, Gong Hua was still confused.

Cas glared straight at him and scowled, “Why don’t you know anything? Your country’s name is what you call the place you were born in. You’re a citizen of Zhan Yan⁸, aren’t you? Then, the first word of your full name should be Zhan, then Gong Hua, followed by your surname. A surname is... simply a surname! Your father’s surname is your surname!”

“Cas, quiet!” Cedric bellowed at him furiously. “Did you forget what I told you?”

Cas froze. Just then, he recalled his brother’s instructions regarding Gong Hua. Gong Hua couldn’t remember anything, so it was important that no one ask him about his past. When he remembered, Cas immediately sealed his mouth shut, albeit a little too late.

Owen consoled Gong Hua nervously, “Gong Hua, it’s okay if you don’t remember your full name. It’ll come to you someday, so take your time to remember...”

Suddenly, Gong Hua blurted out, “Leaf · Gong Hua · Tree.”

“What?” Owen was stunned.

“My full name is Leaf · Gong Hua · Tree.”

Gong Hua had racked his brains to come up with the name. The country he had lived in... He only knew that he had lived together with the Leaf Tribe, so it should be Leaf, right? And if his father’s family name was his own... since he was born from the Tree, it was his mother as well as his father. Since the Tree was only called Tree, then it should naturally be his family name.

“Leaf? You’re lying!” Cas immediately forgot his brother’s warning again and roared, “There’s no country like that! The Continent of Xi Zong⁹ only consists of our country, Zhan Yan, the western side’s Yi Shuang¹⁰, the midland’s Linlan¹¹, and the eastern front’s Dashi¹². Everyone’s names should start with Zhan, Shuang, Lan, or Shi.”

“Leaf?” Cedric was dumbfounded and exclaimed, “Could you be from the Leaf Tribe?”

“I am a Flower.” Gong Hua thought for a bit and added, “Leaf Tribe’s Flower.”

“Flower?” Cedric’s was confused. It wasn’t that surprising to him though, as he had minimal knowledge about the Leaf Tribe in the first place.

It was extremely rare to find Leaf Tribes in Xi Zong. The Leaves never associated with the outside world, so it was very rare to come across them. The only kind of information humans could obtain were rumors, rumors on how everyone in the Leaf Tribe was beautiful, kind hearted, etc. It was impossible to get any more information than that.

⁸ Country of Zhan Yan (战炎国): the name of their country, lit. “Country of War and Flames.”

⁹ 席宗, could mean “Democratic Sect,” the “Sect of Xi.”

¹⁰ Country of Yi Shuang (倚霜国), lit. “Country of Relying Frost.”

¹¹ Country of Linlan (林岚国), lit “Country of Misty Woods.”

¹² Country of Dashi (大士国), lit. “Country of Mighty Soldiers.”

After looking around and ensuring that there weren't any one else nearby, Cedric whispered, "In short, you belong to the Leaf Tribe, right?"

The moment Gong Hua nodded his head, Cedric's expression sank.

"Okay, I've kept you waiting."

Mila flipped open the tent door and rushed out briskly. The instant she walked out, she noticed the odd expressions on everyone's faces. She couldn't help but suspect that Gong Hua's abnormality had been discovered. Frantically, she questioned, "What's wrong?"

Owen scratched his head and said, "I'm not too sure myself, Gong Hua seems to, seems to not be of the Human Tribe..."

Mila froze. The matter seemed more serious than she had thought.

Just then, Cedric abruptly turned to the two of them and said, "Mila, Owen, let's go over to the side and talk for a while, shall we? Cas, why don't you chat with Gong Hua for a while... I'm warning you, you're not allowed to mention anything about the Leaf Tribe, and you're also not allowed to bully her, understand?"

Cas stared at his brother's expression and understood the gravity of his warning. He nodded his head vigorously. As a sign of making peace, he even took the initiative to clasp Gong Hua's hand.

Cedric dragged Owen and Mila to the side without a moment's hesitation. Owen and Mila were in a fog; they only stared at Cedric and waited for his explanation.

Cedric fixed his gaze on the two, his tone somber as he spoke, "Owen, Mila, Leaves are all very valuable. Especially now since there are rumors that say the Leaf Tribe have relocated to another continent. None of them are left on this continent anymore. If you bring Gong Hua to an auction, you can sell her for an unbelievably high price..."

Chapter Two

Owen and Mila... Humans

I'd been learning new things consistently. But the more I
learned, the more confused I got.
Had I improved or gotten steadily worse?

—Gong Hua

Before he could finish his sentence, Mila raised her voice and hollered, "Cedric! What did you say? Whoever dares to sell Gong Hua will have to fight me for it!"

Owen had been confused by the pile of information thrown at him. It was only when he heard Mila's shriek did he finally react. Compared to Mila's, his reaction was a lot more straightforward. He raised his fist and glared menacingly at Cedric, as if cautioning him—If you dare say one more word, then I'll give you a beating.

"Don't get so agitated!" Cedric frantically put up his hands and surrendered. He shook his head vigorously as he explained himself. "I was just testing you guys, to see what you would do in this predicament. I really don't have any other intentions!"

Upon hearing his words, Mila was still somewhat aggravated. She didn't hold much trust in Cedric's explanations. But, Owen, in contrast, dropped his fist. He bellowed, "You bastard, don't experiment like that every single time! If you haven't stayed in this military camp for such a long time and everyone has gotten used to your weird temper, you would have been beaten to death a long time ago!"

Cedric smiled weakly.

"Is Gong Hua really from the Leaf Tribe?" Mila questioned uncertainly. After she found out that Gong Hua wasn't human, she felt a little confused. It was because she had little to no understanding of the Leaf Tribe and didn't know whether the tribe was good or bad.

Cedric honestly replied, "That is one thing I am sure of. I also know little of the Leaf Tribe, and I've only heard of a few passing rumors. So, it's up to you to believe what Gong Hua says."

"Of course I believe her!" Owen immediately roared in response.

This time, it was Mila who hesitated. She couldn't help but murmur softly, "Leaf... Could one person from the Leaf Tribe obliterate an entire town on their own?"

"If that was possible, I would have killed her long ago," Cedric put his point across bluntly.

Mila widened her eyes, whilst Cedric went quiet and did not offer any further explanations.

Owen quickly tugged at Mila and whispered in her ear, "Cedric's entire family, including his parents and sister, died in that town. If Cas had not whined to the military group about coming here for an inspection, he would also have died there! These two brothers did not have it easy for the last month. That was why I took the chance to persuade Cedric to bring Cas out for a breath of fresh air."

Mila nodded her head, and even though she tried her best to suppress it, she could not help but show a sorrowful expression.

Cedric didn't seem to want to bring up his family matters. He shifted the topic of conversation back to Gong Hua. "If she's from the Leaf Tribe, then it's even more impossible for her to be the murderer. The Leaf Tribe is well known for their altruistic nature. Even though they are born gifted and could easily become spirit charmers, they couldn't possibly be this powerful... To tell you the truth, I have no idea how anyone or anything could be this powerful."

His words seemed to put Mila's heart at ease. She held complete trust in Gong Hua, so Gong Hua must be of the Leaf Tribe. Moreover, Cedric had mentioned that the Leaf Tribe was a benevolent species. As long as Gong Hua was kind, it didn't matter whether she was human or something else.

Owen glanced further down and could not help but point out, "Let's go back quickly! Your Cas is full of odd tricks and I don't know how he'll pester Gong Hua."

Cedric taunted him, "Oh, how caring you are towards your dear daughter! Relax, Cas is still young; there's nothing he can do towards Gong Hua."

"What nonsense are you talking about?" Once Owen finished reprimanding Cedric, he immediately spun around, talking as he walked, "I'm not wasting my breath on you anymore. I'll go take a look at those two brats. There aren't any adults around and it would be disastrous if they got out of hand!"

Cedric and Mila broke into smiles, but the moment Owen turned around, Cedric whispered to Mila in a low voice, "If you guys are already acting like this, will you be able to leave Gong Hua behind in a city or village when the time comes?"

Mila smiled and answered, "I just can't bear to do it. It'll be fine to leave her in the army. Gong Hua is no longer a child, and she is a fast learner, so she'll be able to help out with a lot of stuff."

Cedric shook his head in exasperation, "You like that kid that much? She doesn't look that special. Her looks are delicate, yet she can't be considered beautiful. Her appearance is a bit different from the legends that speak of the Leaf Tribe."

Mila chuckled, "Once you get to know her, you'll definitely like that child."

"Will I?"

Cedric didn't think along those same lines. For him, the issue of "liking her" wasn't important. What was vital to him right now was find the murderer who had decimated his town. He will make him pay for what he had done; an eye for an eye!

After the adults left, Cas clutched Gong Hua's hand and discovered that the latter's hands were smooth, exquisite, and wonderful to the touch. The people around him, even the girls, never had hands so delicate. So he couldn't help but stroke them a few more times like a little pervert. Yet the moments he raised his head, he saw Gong Hua staring at his hands intensely.

Cas' face reddened and he quickly used words to divert the other party's attention. "Jie Jie¹³, how old are you this year?"

Gong Hua lower his head slightly to face Cas, as the latter was shorter than him by half a head. He then replied, "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Cas was dumbfounded and retorted suspiciously, "Why don't you know? How long you've been born is how old you are!"

"I've always been sitting under the Tree. I don't know how long I've sat there, or how old I am."

"You don't know how long you've sat under the tree?" Cas became even more mystified. "How long can you sit under a tree? You mean, you lived under a tree?"

Gong Hua pondered. Living under a tree seems to be right, so he nodded her head.

"Then, you must be good at climbing trees!" Cas came to his own conclusion, and jumped about ecstatically, "I also love climbing trees. Let's climb trees together later, shall we?"

"Why should we climb trees?" Gong Hua didn't quite understand.

Cas froze. Having climbed trees for so long, he has never really thought of the reason he did it. He contemplated the reason, and forcefully came up with an answer. "Because it's fun?"

"So climbing trees is a form of playing?" Gong Hua was eager to know what the word "play" meant.

"Yeah!"

"That's good." Gong Hua nodded her head.

"What is?"

"Climbing trees is good."

Cas's eyes lit up at Gong Hua's answer. Ever since he joined the military, he had never met people close to his age. Even though Gong Hua looked much older than him and was a girl,

¹³ 姐姐 (jie jie), means big sister.

he still felt like he had gained a playmate. He abruptly yelled ecstatically, "Then, let's compete at climbing trees later!"

"What's 'compete?'" The word "compete" added in front of "climbing trees" made Gong Hua perplexed once more.

"We use it to see who can climb faster! The faster one wins!"

"What's 'win?'"

"Jie Jie, you really have a lot of questions!"

Gong Hua nodded her head and admitted, "I do have a lot of problems¹⁴."

Cas suddenly burst out laughing and said, "Who would say that she has a lot of problems. The meaning changes when it's phrased like that!"

"What does it mean?"

As it was rare for him to have a chance being a teacher, Cas acted all high and mighty and explained, "That means you have a lot of problems!"

Doesn't that mean the same thing? Gong Hua was completely confused.

Luckily, Owen and the others had returned by then. Owen yelled out before he even came into proximity, "Cas, did you bully Gong Hua?"

"I didn't!" Cas raised his voice. "I even answered many of her questions! You're bullying me!"

"I'm sure I didn't accuse you wrongly. You're a brat full of weird ideas. You must have bullied Gong Hua!" Owen grappled Cas' head and fiercely rubbed the latter's hair. "You little pervert, speak up! Did you take advantage of her?"

He had indeed secretly touched her hands. Cas was speechless, and felt a little guilty.

"... What have you done?" Owen's voice resonated loudly. He said it for the sake of it, but he never expected Cas to have actually done something.

Not only was Cas unable to answer, his face had also turned beet red.

Upon seeing his expression, Owen's jaw almost dropped to the ground. He stuttered, "You, you little pervert..."

Cedric never expected to run into this kind of problem upon his return. He had no idea what to do and could only glare at Cas.

As for Mila, she didn't believe Cas would do anything outrageous. Hence, she directly asked Gong Hua, "Did Cas touch you?"

Gong Hua nodded. "He touched my hands."

In order to clear the doubts those two men were having towards a boy, Mila had to ask a little more specifically, "Did he only touch your hands? What about other areas? Or did he say anything to you?"

¹⁴ The word used in both cases is 问题. When Cas used it in the previous sentence, the word meant "questions." But when phrased another way, such as the way Gong Hua used it, the meaning changes to "problems." Which is why Cas finds the usage funny.

Gong Hua nodded her head again and spoke, "He said climbing trees is playing and wanted to compete in climbing trees."

After hearing what Gong Hua had to say, Mila spun around. She spread her hands out and looked amusedly at Owen. The latter subsequently turned towards Cas and bellowed, "You sneaky little brat, I thought you really had done something. Turns out you only touched her hands. Why the hell did you get red like that? You have held hands with countless big sisters before, haven't you?"

Holding and touching are two different things! Cas retorted in his heart, yet he did not have the courage to say it out loud and risk getting reprimanded. Moreover, his own brother Cedric was still shooting him a piercing stare with suspicion written all over his face.

"Enough, both of you should stop bullying Cas!" Mila spoke in an amused voice. "Gong Hua is strong and she's taller than Cas by half a head! There's no way Cas could mistreat her."

Owen immediately shouted, "Mila, it's not like you don't know this. Gong Hua is like a child! She doesn't know anything. Even if Cas did anything to her, she wouldn't retaliate!"

Cedric dissented, "What exactly do you think my brother is, an incorrigible rascal? He's only twelve! 'What' can he do?"

"Who knows?" Owen snapped back.

The two men were stubborn, refusing to compromise. Standing at the side, Mila also started to feel distressed. She immediately instructed Gong Hua, "Gong Hua, you must never allow men to touch you freely! It's not all right even if they're younger than you."

"We can't touch hands?" Gong Hua turned towards Cas.

Mila pondered it and said, "Holding hands is fine, but touching isn't." She knew Gong Hua wouldn't understand the difference between holding and touching, so she grasped Gong Hua's hands to demonstrate.

Upon seeing this, Cas' face instantly caved in. He made eyes at Gong Hua, trying to signal at her. It was a pity Gong Hua didn't understand. She then spoke frankly, "Cas just touched my hands."

Mila froze and questioned, "Touch? Not hold hands?"

Gong Hua shook his head and affirmed while stroking Mila's hand, "Touch."

At Gong Hua's words, the two men, who had been bickering earlier, came to the same understanding. They both shot Cas a merciless glare. Intimidated by the stares of the three adults, Cas cried out, "That's because Gong Hua's hands are smooth and pleasing to the touch. I couldn't help but stroke a few times. That's all!"

"Who gave you the permission to touch her? You perverted little rascal, I'll definitely slaughter you today!"

"Don't! I didn't do it on purpose!" Cas abruptly darted away, trying to escape his incoming death.

Owen bellowed and chased after the little pervert. It was rare for Cedric to sit by and refuse to help his little brother. He merely shouted at him, infuriated, "Cas, you're grounded!"

Watching from the side, Gong Hua asked confusedly, "What's the meaning of 'slaughter?'"

Mila hesitated, but explained, "It means taking another person's life."

Gong Hua asked again, "Owen wants to take Cas' life? But, we're going to play. We can't play if he has no life."

Mila immediately responded, "Owen's just joking! I've explained to you the meaning of joking, haven't I?"

Gong Hua nodded his head. "Jokes" were words said purely for fun and not to be taken seriously. At the time, he hadn't understood what "interesting" meant. But when he saw how Owen ran after Cas exasperatedly and the wailing expression on Cas' face as he ran for his life... Gong Hua seemed to gradually understand what "interesting" meant.

Owen grabbed Cas' head and ground his fist into the latter's skull. Cas howled in pain at the action. It was then that Gong Hua finally smiled, even bursting into laughter. His laughs invigorated Owen, and he ground his fist into Cas's head with even more force.

Upon hearing Gong Hua's laughter, Mila, for once, was thankful for Owen's childish temper and immature ways. She even wanted to call out and root for Owen, but at the sight of Cas' pitiful expression, she decided to simply smile and look on.

The group walked for the entire morning, and finally reached the lake. The lake was huge, and a layer of fog covered it in the distance. It was impossible to determine where it ended with just one glance.

The lake was enveloped by forests on all sides, suffusing its water with a light, velvet green. Even the distant mountains were reflected in the water. A few small beasts were on the shores of the lake, drinking leisurely, seemingly unafraid of humans. They merely raised their heads, at peered at them in curiosity.

As they gazed upon the resplendent scenery before them, the crowd could not help but gasp in awe.

Gong Hua was the only person who didn't feel particularly awed. Having lived most of his life under the Tree, Gong Hua found any kind of scenery to be worth marveling at, not just the lake before him.

"What a beautiful lake!" With her gaze fixated on the sights before her, Mila asked, "Does it have a name?"

Cedric nodded and spoke, "The residents nearby call it the Moon Lake. I heard that at night, the moon is reflected perfectly on the lake."

"But we can't stay until night." Owen immediately chimed in. "There are too many beasts in this area, it's too dangerous at night."

"Such a pity..." Although Mila said that, if they had to stay the night, she would probably be the first one to object. For her, ensuring the children's safety was more important than any beautiful scenery.

"We can go swimming!" Cas whooped ecstatically.

To a ten-year old child, swimming was more enticing than any dazzling landscape.

"I won't allow it!" Owen immediately opposed the idea.

Cas was surprised. His face crumpled, and he yelled indignantly, "Why?"

Cedric coldly said, "This is one of the deeper regions of the forest, who knows what kind of animals are in this lake. If you want to be eaten, then go ahead."

Cas sucked his lips into a pout.

Just then, Gong Hua sprinted to the lake, and before anyone could stop him, he leapt into the water.

Even though the weather was warm, bordering on hot, the water was freezing cold. Gong Hua loved it immensely. It had been ages since he had drank such fresh, delicious water.

Cas pointed towards Gong Hua, extremely dissatisfied, and raised his voice in protest, "Why can Gong Hua go in, while I can't!"

Owen was speechless. Cedric glowered at his brother, "That's because she's of the Leaf Tribe, a child of the forest. But you're not!"

Hearing his brother scold him, tears started to well up in Cas' eyes.

At this, Mila pondered, and yelled to Gong Hua, who was still in the lake, "Gong Hua, can Cas come down to play with you? Will you be able to protect him?"

Didn't "play" refer to climbing trees? Gong Hua was confused; he had only dived into the lake to drink his fill of fresh water. But he did understand when Mila asked him to protect Cas. That was because Flowers were born solely for the purpose of protecting the Leaf Tribe.

"Protect" was an instinct he didn't need to learn. It just meant that the people he had to protect now included not only the Leaf Tribe, but also Owen and Mila. If so, another Cas wouldn't hurt. So, he nodded his head in agreement.

Cas wanted to leap in the water immediately, but he cast a hesitant look at his brother. It was only when Cedric nodded his head that he cheered loudly, "Hooray!" Without a moment's hesitation, he stripped down to his underwear and ran to the lake in one breath, diving straight in. Massive sprays of water erupted from the surface, splashing Gong Hua's entire face.

Cas felt that wasn't enough. He flashed a mischievous smile, and he directed waves of water towards Gong Hua with both his hands, splashing her.

"Cas! Stop fooling around..."

Staring down at the deep, unending depths of the lake, Cedric was extremely uneasy. He opened his mouth to call his brother back, but was stopped by Mila. She smiled and said, "It's okay, the kids are just having fun. Let them play to their hearts' content."

Owen also patted his shoulders and persuaded him, "Relax a little, we're all here. It'll be fine."

"I just..." Cedric didn't know how to get his point across. He fell silent, and after a while he uttered solemnly, "Cas is all I have left."

Owen took a deep breath and said, "You are also the only family Cas has left. Don't always put on such a long face. There's no need to keep forcing him to practice his sword and spirit vision."

Cedric retorted angrily, "It's best to practice spirit vision during childhood. If he misses this opportunity, the chances of mastering it in future are very low!"

Owen hurried on to explain, "I'm not telling you to stop him from practicing; I'm just saying that he needs rest, adequate rest! Oh right, I told you to carry along a map to explain to Gong Hua some basic common knowledge. Did you bring it?"

In the end, Owen thought it simpler to just shift the topic of conversation. He knew that Cedric's family had pretty much all died. As Cedric's mind was set on vengeance, it would be impossible to persuade him at the moment. There was no need to bicker with him in front of the kids.

Owen had spent considerable effort and even roped in his teammates to take turns convincing Cedric before the latter finally agreed to bring Cas out for an outing. That was why he couldn't let this end in hostility.

Cedric nodded his head and said, "I brought the map. I intend to explain this to Cas as well, so it'll be easier to find the culprit later. From what I see, the culprit is already out of this area."

At this time, Mila's furious yell travelled from not too far away, "You two, don't just stand there, bring those stuff you're holding and come here! Then, go start the fire, gather firewood, and catch fish... There're so many things to do. Why aren't you guys getting on with it?"

Owen pulled at Cedric and hollered, "Come on!"

The two children in the lake splashed each other, swam, and played to their hearts' content. It was only at Mila's command that they came ashore.

Mila took a couple towels, and passed one to Cas. When she tried to dry Gong Hua's hair, she recalled that the other's hair was very sensitive, so she frantically stuffed the towel into Gong Hua's hands.

However, Gong Hua was confused and asked, "What's the towel for?"

"It's more comfortable if your hair is dry."

Gong Hua shook his head and said, "It's a lot more comfortable when it's wet."

"Really? You like water? But you don't seem to like bathing much... cold water? You like cold water?" Mila paused mid-sentence, coming into a sudden realization.

Gong Hua nodded his head.

Mila understood. She shook her head and said, "Seriously, you could have just told me you liked cold water! Why didn't you mention it? I could have even saved the effort of heating the water! Then, just wipe yourself up slightly at the very least! If not, you'll be dripping wet and it wouldn't be good if the water drips onto the food."

Gong Hua nodded, and he dried himself using the towel. Cas had already finished and tossed aside his towel. He ran over to Owen's side, exclaiming, "Smells good!"

Owen swelled with pride as he declared, "Of course, that's because it's Owen's special roasted meat!"

"Isn't this just normal meat?" Cedric grumbled. "And I roasted it, you merely started the fire."

"It takes skills to start a fire..."

Mila interrupted the conversation. "Is the meat ready? If it's cooked, just put it on the bread and let the kids have it first! They've been playing around for so long. They must be hungry."

Subsequently, Gong Hua and Cas were each handed a piece of bread topped with meat. But Gong Hua didn't take a bite, instead he fell into thought. If he could tell people that he didn't like hot water, could he also say that he disliked food as well?

Cas said as he ate, "Delicious! This is really delicious!"

At the sight of Cas, Mila and Owen broke into wide grins. Only Cedric shook his head at his brother.

When Mila saw Gong Hua hadn't touched her food, she asked worriedly, "Gong Hua, why aren't you eating? Is it not to your liking?"

Seeing Mila and Owen's smiles, Gong Hua took a bite without thinking and said, "Delicious..." It was only after Gong Hua had spoken that he froze. He obviously didn't find the meat delicious, yet he had nodded his head... Why had he nodded?

"Gong Hua?" Mila took the towel and wiped Gong Hua's neck as she beamed a smile, "Seriously, what's on your mind? The juice is trickling down your neck."

Gazing at Mila's smile, Gong Hua suddenly felt that the sandwich truly was delicious. As long as Mila and Owen smiled, anything would be delicious.

After they ate to their fullest, Owen cast a sideways glance at Cedric, the latter carefully extracted a piece of hide and unveiled it on his thigh. The front side of the hide was composed of intricate designs and looked like a map.

Gong Hua asked curiously, "What is this?"

Cedric's original motive was to explain, so he did. "This is a map of Sisha. Sisha has three continents—Xi Zong, Xia Sha, and Jun De. Look, these two continents that have a few

regions connecting them, they're Xi Zong and Xia Sha. These two continents are separated by a gulf, named the Gulf of Zhan. To the south of Xi Zong and Xia Sha is the Sea of Sisha, and below it is Jun De.

Jun De... Gong Hua froze, the name sounded rather familiar.

Cedric didn't notice Gong Hua's strange response and merely continued. "The continent we are on now is Xi Zong. Our current position is in the middle right of the continent, which is also at the end of the Central Rockies, near the center of Zhan Yan. We'll have to cross the Central Rockies to get to Dashi, which is just beside us."

Even though Cedric said many things, Gong Hua could not understand a word of it. He asked, "What is Sisha?"

Upon hearing Gong Hua's words, the group fell silent. Only Cas remarked, "That's impossible, you don't even know what Sisha is? Sisha is, is... is here! Everything is Sisha!"

Gong Hua stared at Cas, perplexed.

Cedric further explained, "Sisha was originally a word for the creation of spirits. Afterwards, it was used to refer to all matter in this world. Whether it's us, the earth we step on, or the sky, everything is composed of Sisha. Sisha is the whole world.

Chapter Three

Spirits, Sisha, Humans, Flower...All Creations

Many people, even if they had become my enemies, I never regretted meeting them.
As aside from the hatred, they had brought me even fonder memories.
Yet, I could not ask if they regretted meeting me.
I was too afraid of hearing the answer.

—Gong Hua

“What is the creation of spirits?” Gong Hua suddenly felt that he would be asking a lot of questions.

Cedric heaved a long sigh and said, “Let’s start from the beginning then. Do you know about ‘spirits?’”

Gong Hua shook his head.

Cas immediately butted in, “I know! Everything in Sisha is made up of spirits ‘bound’ together, right?”

Nodding his head, Cedric said, “That’s right. Theoretically, all of Sisha is made up of spirits bound together, including humans. However, when we talk about spirits, we are normally referring to other things.”

“What kind of other things?” asked Gong Hua curiously.

“They are divided into three types: nature spirits, imagery spirits, and physical spirits. Nature spirits are the spirits used by spirit charmers, spiritmancers, and spirit binders... Oh! You don’t understand again?”

Gong Hua nodded, troubling Cedric. He didn’t imagine that Gong Hua was lacking even the most basic knowledge, just like a baby. Now, he really had no idea where to begin.

However, Owen kept giving Cedric looks, urging him to explain. Feeling pressured, he could only take a deep breath and start explaining, “Nature spirits are spirits not strongly bound together and are loosely scattered in nature. They can be used to attack or protect things, and their characteristics can be altered to create special items.

“For example, I am a spirit charmer. A spirit charmer can bind nature spirits together and use these bounded spirits to attack enemies or for other purposes. Owen is a spiritmancer.

He can 'unbind' the spirits, leaving enemies vulnerable. Afterwards, he uses weapons to defeat the weakened enemies.

"Aside from that, there's another profession that uses spirits: spirit binders. They can differentiate between extremely tiny spirits and by unbinding and binding those spirits, they can create special items."

After all that was said, Gong Hua wanted to ask many questions, but didn't know where to start. Almost every sentence Cedric said contained words that he couldn't understand.

"Anyways, that's it for nature spirits!"

Cedric was completely intimidated by Gong Hua's unrelenting questions, so while Gong Hua was still hesitating on whether or not to ask, he promptly went onto the next topic. "And then, there're imagery spirits and physical spirits. These two are based on beliefs. Imagery spirits are spirits that do not have a material existence, such as wine spirits, good harvest spirits, war spirits, and the like. Physical spirits are much harder to explain... Ah, I remember now! The idol of the Leaf Tribe is a physical spirit. I heard that it was a tree?"

Cedric wasn't too sure though, as everything about the Leaf Tribe was only hearsay .

Although Gong Hua didn't understand what "beliefs," "imagery spirits," or "physical spirits" were exactly, the Tree was something all too familiar to him. He immediately said, "Tree is Mother and Father."

Cedric misunderstood and nodded, saying, "That's right, numerous tribes see the spirits they believe in as their own ancestors. All in all, physical spirits are an unusually powerful existence. There are often tribes that believe in them. Do you understand now?"

Gong Hua shook his head, making Cedric heave a long sigh at the sky and feel that he had just wasted his breathe in trying to explain.

"Oh, you keep your mouth shut!" A confused Owen growled. "Even I couldn't understand your explanations, let alone, say, Gong Hua. I only wanted you to talk about things like spirit charmers, spiritmancers, and spirit binders, and see whether Gong Hua has the ability to work in these three professions! Why are you talking nonsense?"

Cedric, who had explained until he was incredibly thirsty, roared back, "Wasn't it because your daughter asked a bunch of questions!"

"I've told you. She's not my daughter..."

Mila quickly tried to mediate, "All right, all right. Stop it. Two grown men quarrelling in front of the kids, aren't you two ashamed of yourselves?!"

Owen snorted, and ordered, "Won't you just take a quick look at Gong Hua's ability?!"

Rolling his eyes, Cedric snappily said, "Have you forgotten how you were tested back then? It's impossible to know if one has talent or not with just one test. She'll have to at least train her spirit vision for a month, and only then can her talents be judged."

"Oh," answered Owen, knowing he was in the wrong this time.

Then, Cas butted in, boasting, "I can see spirits already!"

That piqued Owen's interest. He asked, "Oh? So what are you suited for?"

Cas pouted, quietly saying, "Brother said my level of spirit vision isn't that high, so it'd be difficult for me to be a spirit charmer. So I'm more suited in becoming a spiritmancer."

"Spiritmancers are great!" Owen greatly praised at once. "Being a Spiritmancer is the only job for men. See the weapons and armors... you like it, right? I knew you'd like it just by looking at your eyes. You're indeed a natural born spiritmancer! Do you want to touch this sword?"

At the sight of Owen unsheathing his sword, Cas completely forgot about the matter with his spirit vision, as the shining sword attracted all of his attention. He immediately moved forward to touch it.

Cedric rolled his eyes at Owen, but he did not forbid his little brother from touching the sword. He had intended for Owen to be Cas's teacher after all. Thus, it was for the best.

In fact, Owen had known Cedric's intentions and he had thought of tutoring Cas since a long time ago. But, he didn't intend to lose out! Letting Cas play with his sword, Owen turned around and negotiated with Cedric, "I'll teach your Cas if you are willing to be my Gong Hua's teacher. How about it?"

"And you're still saying she's not your daughter? You're already using 'my Gong Hua!'" Cedric snappily said, "We still don't even know whether she can see spirits or not! If her spirit vision reaches the level of a spirit charmer's one month from now, I'll take her on as my student. But even if her abilities are not up to it, I'll still pretend that she's my student so she can stay in the camp as military personnel. Is this all right? Team Leader?"

"Heh heh." Owen laughed, embarrassed to have had his true intentions seen through. Yet he still agreed, "Deal!"

"That's great!" Mila embraced Gong Hua at once, saying happily, "You're now military personnel, Gong Hua."

Seeing Mila's smile, Gong Hua started to smile too, and asked, "What's 'military personnel?'"

"Just like me! I'm military personnel. As long as you're military personnel, you can stay at the camp together with Owen and me!"

To be together with Owen and Mila... Even though Gong Hua was happy hearing those words, he asked in a surprised voice, "You're not going to abandon me?"

Gong Hua shocked everyone there, but Mila quickly replied, somewhat forced, "Abandon? Why are you saying that? You, have you been worrying about that?"

Gong Hua nodded and said, "The Leaves abandoned me. They don't want me anymore. After that, Tree disappeared. He didn't want me either. Why don't they want me, Mila?"

Pained, Mila hugged Gong Hua and said, "Don't you care about them, Gong Hua. There isn't anybody who doesn't want you now. And at the very least, I want you, and I will never abandon you. Owen too."

"Mila will never abandon me?" Gong Hua lifted his head in surprise, and looked at Mila.

Mila grew even sadder upon seeing Gong Hua's expression. All this time, she didn't know Gong Hua had lived with them while thinking that he was going to be abandoned.

"That's right. I definitely won't abandon you, ever!"

Mila hugged Gong Hua tightly, so tightly that it hurt. Soon after, the lofty Owen opened his arms and hugged the both of them, which undoubtedly made it worse with his strength of a spiritmancer.

Although both of them were hugged so tightly to the point of pain, Gong Hua realized that he was happy. Very, very happy.

However, Cedric, who was at the side, couldn't help feel confused. According to the rumors, the Leaf Tribe was gentle in nature. How could they simply discard a child of their tribe?

Though he was confused, he didn't think it was a good time to be suspicious after seeing the three of them looking like a harmonious family. He hid the doubts in his heart, merely thinking it would be fine if he was more cautious from now on.

"Gong Hua!"

Cas, bored of the sword in his hands, tugged at Gong Hua and said with his eyes shining, "Let's compete at tree climbing!"

"Okay."

Looking at both kids hand in hand searching for a tree to climb, and Gong Hua with his child-like actions, even Cedric wanted to clobber his own head. He scolded himself furiously for his suspicions. How could a child like her be of any danger?

Mila tried suggesting to Cedric, "Will you let Cas come and play with Gong Hua in the future? They're both kids, so they should be able to get along well. Cas is only 10 years old. Surely, you wouldn't want him to have a head full of thoughts of vengeance?"

Cedric was silent for a moment. While he was thinking, the laughter of the two kids traveled over from a distance...

He nodded.

Owen lifted open the tent flap, but only Mila was inside.

She was busying herself with altering a few skirts to Gong Hua's size. If it wasn't for the fact that there weren't any towns nearby, she would've liked to buy some flowery cloth and make some new clothes for Gong Hua.

"Where's Gong Hua?"

Mila raised her head, and after seeing that it was Owen, she went back to her sewing and replied, "Out playing with Cas. They told me that they're going to climb trees. Even though a girl climbing trees is really not that appropriate... but it's fine as long as they're happy."

"Why is it that Cas has become so attached to Gong Hua? That was different from my original plans," Owen mumbled, scratching his head.

"What plans?" Mila interrogated immediately, putting down the work in her hands. Her ears were sharp to things concerning Gong Hua.

As Owen's plans were nothing shameful to him, he honestly replied, "I was thinking of introducing Gong Hua to Cedric. But who knew Cas would get so latched onto Gong Hua instead."

"You wanted to bring Cedric and Gong Hua together?" Mila was surprised at first, but subsequently acknowledged Owen's idea.

Though Cedric might be older than Gong Hua by around 10 years, he was still a spirit charmer after all. The spirit charmer profession had even less people than spiritmancers, but since it had so many broad uses, it was in great demand. In their team of thirty plus people, there were eight spiritmancers, but only one spirit charmer. That was why Cedric had higher pay. even though Owen was the team leader.

"However, Gong Hua isn't human. Is that going to be all right?" Mila suddenly remembered a problem. Gong Hua's body was different from a normal human's.

"I've asked around. There should be no problem! The Leaf Tribe's people are similar to humans. Although there may be some difficulties in giving birth, Cedric has said before that he only wants to concentrate on raising his younger brother. Plus, he hates kids," Owen immediately responded.

Even though Mila was still puzzled, she stopped pressing him and started lecturing instead.

"Then, isn't it better that Cas likes Gong Hua? Cedric doesn't seem to care much about girls. But as long as his brother likes her and you work hard on persuading him that Cas needs a full family, surely he would waver in his decision? You can also get Cas to start asking for a mom."

"Oh! That could work!" Owen nodded his head and thoughtfully said, "Maybe we could have the two weddings done together. It'd save trouble."

Two weddings? Mila froze for a moment and then realized the meaning behind Owen's words... Was he proposing to her?

Owen said with a negotiating tone, "I've been thinking about it. After we finish with the things here, I'll make a deal with Cedric and find a place where we can all live together."

"How can it be that simple?" Mila hung her head, and softly said, "We... you do not have a house. Where will we live?"

Owen then hurriedly voiced his plans, "My distant cousin, West, has a plot of land under his name. We can live in the city where that plot is. He'll set Cedric and me up as protectorate soldiers, the lord's bodyguards, or something similar. It's better than running around all over the place like this. Cas is only ten years old, and we don't have anyone else to rely on. In the end, it's no good always staying in the army."

After he finished, Owen nervously looked at Mila. The latter, however, kept her head low shyly and only murmured a "Mm" after a long while.

Owen suddenly clasped Mila in an embrace. She made a short cry of surprise while he maniacally yelled, "Great! Great!" He then lifted her off the ground and twirled her around.

Mila, her face red from embarrassment, tried to cover up her shyness by scolding the other, "Idiot! Quickly put me down!"

Owen laughed out loud instead, shouting with all his might, "Never, I'm never letting you down!"

"What are Owen and Mila doing?"

"Things kids shouldn't be asking about."

Suddenly tripping, Owen nearly fell flat on the floor as he stumbled. He finally sat Mila safely on the ground. He turned to the tent's opening where Gong Hua and Cas stood, hand in hand, dirty from all their playing.

Then, Gong Hua suddenly hugged Cas and lifted him high, spinning him in circles just like Owen and Mila did, while the startled latter shouted, "What are you doing?!"

Gong Hua stopped his spinning but continued to hold Cas. He turned his head to look at Owen and Mila and said, "I'm doing what Owen and Mila did."

Hearing that, Mila lowered her head in embarrassment even more. Even though Owen had been bold about it, he suddenly also became embarrassed. He rubbed his head idiotically, pretending that nothing had happened.

Cas shouted, "Idiot! Mila Jie is a girl, but I'm not a girl! I don't want to be spun around! Put me down!"

Setting Cas down, Gong Hua looked at him and said, "Then, how about you spin me around?"

"I can't lift you..." Glancing at Owen and Mila, he said precociously, "Let's go, let's go! My big brother told me to train my spirit vision. Come train with me! We shouldn't bother them."

Mila hurriedly lifted her head and stuttered, "You two, don't-don't go too far!"

Cas let out a small "eek" and purposely asked, "But then we'll be back too soon, you know? Is that all right?"

Mila was stunned for a second, and then turned away with her face bright red. She then screamed at Cas, "You little pervert! What are you spouting?!"

"I'm not a little pervert! Teacher Owen is the one who's a big pervert!"

Cas made a face, grabbed hold of Gong Hua, and ran. Behind them, they could hear Owen grumbling and swearing.

"Let's go!" Pulling on Gong Hua, Cas said while he walked, "You like water, right? We'll go fetch a bucket of water, and I'll teach you how to see water spirits."

"Owen is saying to go back." Although they had already run for quite a distance, Gong Hua could still hear Owen's shouts.

Cas said indifferently, "Ignore him! He doesn't really want us to go back. Teacher Owen still has to do the lovey-dovey with Mila Jie!"

"What's doing the lovey-dovey?"

"Lovey-dovey is when a guy and a girl do embarrassing things together."

"What is embarrassing?"

"Embarrassing is..."

During the endless chain of questions and answers, the two filled a bucket with water. Lifting the bucket together, they walked to the tree they had just been climbing.

Cas was excited to be a teacher for the first time. As soon as they set the bucket down, he quickly told Gong Hua, "Hurry. Look at the water."

Hearing this, Gong Hua knelt down and peered at the water.

"Okay. This is what Ge Ge¹⁵ said. You have to keep staring at the water with your heart completely calm, listening to nothing, and feeling nothing. Pretend you only have eyes and place all your senses towards your vision! Like this, try it!"

Cas closed his mouth after he finished and also knelt next to the bucket while watching Gong Hua. But children were children, so he didn't have that much patience. No more than a few seconds later, he impatiently asked, "How is it? Do you see them?"

Puzzled, Gong Hua said, "I can see water."

"That's not it! Don't you see the little bits in the water?"

"Yes." Gong Hua nodded.

"No? Don't worry, that's normal! My brother said that only after a month of training can you vaguely see them. There are a lot of people who aren't gifted and thus cannot see spirits their entire lives... What did you just say?"

Stunned, Cas abruptly stopped mid-sentence and stared at Gong Hua with disbelief as his brain finally registered Gong Hua's words.

"I see them," Gong Hua repeated, and then added, "there are little bits everywhere in the water."

Cas' eyes widened to the size of a beast's, and immediately shouted, "How can you see everything?! Ge Ge told me that seeing even half of them warrants a passing grade on the

¹⁵ 哥哥, ge ge. Means big brother.

advanced spirit vision exam! It's extremely hard, you know! There are loads of powerful spirit charmers who only have intermediate spirit vision!"

Gong Hua still said, "I can see everything."

Cas gaped at Gong Hua, but after spending these few days with her, he was familiar with Gong Hua's personality. She wouldn't lie. He couldn't help but say in admiration, "That's incredible. Your spirit vision is so powerful! Could it be because you are..."

He looked at his surroundings and muttered, "In the Leaf Tribe, is everyone's spirit vision this good?"

"I don't know," Gong Hua honestly replied.

Cas fell backwards, and lay on the ground with his hands and feet all sprawled out. He grumbled, "Then, you don't need to train at all! You're even better than my brother. My brother hasn't even passed the intermediate exam! He said spirit charmers who can pass the intermediate test before they're thirty are already really amazing."

Gong Hua looked at Cas and also lay down, copying the latter. Lying there, he saw the blue sky and the white clouds. The green grass underneath him was still a little damp. He felt very comfortable.

After lying down for a while, Cas suddenly pointed to the sky and said, "Look at that cloud, doesn't it look like a pack of meat buns?"

"Not really."

"It does! Otherwise, what do you think it looks like?"

Thinking, Gong Hua said, "Tree leaves."

"... Fine, I guess it really does look more like tree leaves."

"That cloud," Gong Hua indicated to a cloud far away, saying, "looks like you."

"Impossible... It really does look like me!"

Cas was awed to find a cloud that resembled his own hair. His hair was never very cooperative; it always stuck up in big bunches in every direction. Even if Mila combed it for him, his hair would revert back to how it was after he ran or jumped around a little. Eventually, even Mila gave up battling with his hair.

Cas cheerfully laughed and said, "So that cloud is mine! It's Cas' cloud!"

"Haha, Cas' cloud." Gong Hua laughed.

After giggling for a while, they continued to lie atop the grass. Suddenly, Cas recalled his brother's instructions to ask Gong Hua about her being abandoned... He didn't really want to ask, but he didn't want to disappoint his brother either. Hence, a little apprehensive, he asked, "Gong Hua, how did your dad and mom abandon you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know anything. That's so weird!" Cas thought for a moment and said in a discouraged voice, "Actually, it's not all that strange. I don't know why my mom, dad, sister, or brother-in-law were killed either... My sister's baby is really cute, you know! I wanted him to

grow up and then teach him call me big brother! But my brother-in-law kept telling me the baby's supposed to call me uncle."

Cas turned around, complaining, "But uncle sounds so strange. Don't you agree that 'brother' sounds better?"

Gong Hua shook his head. He thought it was the same either way.

"But now, the baby is gone... Daddy, Mommy, Sister and Brother-in-law, the neighborhood big brother who gives me candy, the loud-mouthed granny from across the street... everyone's gone. I only have my big brother left."

With that said, Cas covered his eyes with the back of his hands as though the sun rays were hurting his eyes. This made Gong Hua confused. They were under a tree's shade and weren't exposed to the sun at all.

"Ge Ge's turned really weird now though. In the past, he'd bring me toys every time he came home. Now, he only tells me to practice my spirit vision, train my body, practice the sword, and grow up faster. So that we can find the murderer together, kill him, and get our revenge..."

Having only a hazy notion of what Cas meant, Gong Hua wasn't sure if he should comfort him. Actually, he didn't understand what comforting someone meant, so he listened quietly to Cas' complaints. He also wondered why Cas' voice sounded different from before.

Suddenly, Cas turned around and hugged Gong Hua, burying his face into Gong Hua's chest, his shoulders trembling.

Gong Hua supported his body with one arm, looking down on the top of Cas' head. Confused, he asked, "Cas, what're you doing?"

"Stupid... I'm crying!"

"What's crying?"

Cas abruptly looked up, screaming, "You're impossible! Look at me. I'm crying!"

Gong Hua carefully observed Cas, whose eyes were red and overflowing with tears.

Wiping a tear with his finger, Gong Hua tasted it and exclaimed, "Salty water!"

"... You're really strange!" Cas broke into a smile, "Who would go and taste tears!"

"Why is salty water leaking from your eyes?"

Cas wiped his tears and snappily said, "It's called crying! Not salty water but tears! And I'm crying because I'm feeling hurt!"

"Hurt?" Gong Hua asked with concern, "Are you injured?"

"..." Cas mumbled weakly, "Feeling hurt doesn't mean I'm actually injured! It means my heart feels really horrible, like... like my chest has been stuffed with boulders, or like it's been punched and stabbed. Do you get it?"

Even though Cas tried to explain it, Gong Hua still shook his head.

Seeing this, Cas turned a little angry, "How can you not understand what it means to feel hurt? Could it be that when your parents died, you didn't feel sad?"

Thinking about it, Gong Hua shook his head again, saying, "There wasn't sadness, but pain. My whole body was in a lot of pain."

"That's sadness!" Cas said, expectantly.

He thought Gong Hua's pain was the same as feeling sad. In reality, when a Tree died, the Flowers would experience the same thing. It was physical pain, not the type of pain Cas was thinking of.

Not understanding it completely, Gong Hua returned to the original question, "Why do you feel hurt?"

"Because everyone died, and Ge Ge changed too... But Ge Ge's right!" At this point, Cas' voice suddenly became louder, "Everyone dying, my big brother changing... it's all because of that murderer! I'll definitely learn how to use the sword well from Teacher Owen and become a powerful spiritmancer. Then, my brother and I will take our revenge, and kill the culprit!"

Gong Hua asked promptly, "Do you want to kill me, Cas?"

Stunned, Cas turned and looked at Gong Hua. He laughed. "What are you talking about, Gong Hua? I'm not going to kill you. I'm only going to kill the enemy!"

"What is an enemy?"

"An enemy is..."

Cas was at a loss for words. Although he had matured a little after the tragedy, no matter what, he was still only ten years old. The thoughts of hatred were things superimposed on him by his brother Cedric while he, himself, did not truly understand. During these past few days, Cas could even play around with Gong Hua.

Since he knew little about his own hatred, how should he make Gong Hua understand the meaning of hatred?

Cas made an effort to remember the words his brother used, and then changed them into easily understood words. "That is, that is, if someone killed the people you love, then that person's your enemy, and you'll have to take revenge!"

"Why do you have to take revenge?"

Once Gong Hua asked, he patiently waited for an answer. But this time, Cas remained silent for a long, long time before uttering in a small voice, with his head down, "Actually, I don't really know what it means to take revenge. Even if we killed the murderer, no one's going to live again... But Ge Ge said we have to make the culprit pay an eye for an eye. So I guess that means we must take revenge?"

"Are you going to continue crying?"

Seeing the light reflecting off of the tears in Cas' eyes, Gong Hua said understandingly, "You can hold onto me and cry. Mila told me not to let boys touch me, but..." He tilted his head to think. "But you're Cas, so it's all right."

Cas looked up, no longer crying, but rather smiling, "Even though you're really dumb and don't know anything, I still really, really like you... Okay! I've decided."

Gong Hua curiously asked, "Decided what? Have you decided that you want to climb trees now?"

"That's not it!" Cas yelled and without warning, planted a kiss on Gong Hua's forehead. He then loudly swore, "I've already kissed you! So when I grow up, you have to marry me!"

"What is 'marry me?'"

"It's marriage! Like Teacher Owen and Mila Jie spinning around and around and being together forever!"

Cas reached out to hug Gong Hua, but of course he couldn't lift the other for a spin. Although a little discouraged, his morale improved.

"You have to wait for me, Gong Hua! Wait until I've grown up a bit and become an awesome spiritmancer. I'll be able to spin you around in the air. I'll be able to wed you! Ah, you probably don't understand what 'to wed' means. It's the same as marriage!"

Half understanding, Gong Hua asked, "So we'll be together forever?"

"Yes!" Cas passionately nodded his head, "You have to wait for me to grow up! Okay?"

Seeing Cas' serious expression, Gong Hua thought for a little. There didn't seem to be a reason he couldn't wait, so he nodded.

"Okay, I'll wait for you to grow up."

As Mila measured Gong Hua's size to alter clothes for her, she asked, "What are you doing today?"

Thinking, Gong Hua replied, "Waiting for Cas to finish training his spirit vision and come play with me."

Basically, his everyday life now was mostly just helping Mila with her work and waiting for Cas to come play with him.

"You're getting along well with Cas? Oh well, there's only Cas around here to play with you after all." Laughing, Mila asked, "Gong Hua, then do you like Cedric?"

Shaking his head, "I like Owen..."

Mila's heart skipped a beat when she heard those words.

"I like Mila, and I like Cas..."

After hearing that, Mila was amused, but also a little worried. She asked, "So you don't like Cedric?"

Gong Hua shook his head, saying, "I don't like Cedric."

"I thought so." Mila heaved a sigh.

She had heard from Owen that Cedric was focused on finding the culprit who destroyed the town and exacting revenge on him. He even told Cas to teach Gong Hua spirit vision instead. How could Gong Hua like him?

A thing such as feelings could not be rushed! Beating around the bush, Mila said, "But, if you like Cedric and marry him, you'll be able to live with Cas."

Still shaking his head, Gong Hua said, "Cas wants me to wait for him to grow up and marry him, and then be together forever."

Shocked, Mila exclaimed, "Cas said that?! He's still so young...!"

As she said that, she suddenly remembered that Cas was already ten years old. Gong Hua looked about fifteen. The age difference between the two of them was much smaller than the one between Gong Hua and Cedric.

Mila held her forehead in her hand, feeling a bit helpless about this development. However, she didn't plan on stopping it. Owen's plan was very nice, but since Gong Hua and Cas liked each other, it'd be a huge mistake to marry her off to Cedric. That might even turn the brothers against each other!

We can't let that happen! I have to talk to Owen about this. Mila decided.

"Gong Hua, I'm going to look for Owen. Do you want to come along?"

Gong Hua nodded and took the initiative by grabbing onto Mila's hand.

Mila grasped his hand. They weren't in a hurry, so they walked very slowly, slow enough that it could have been considered strolling.

The distance from the camps for regular military personnel to the soldier's field site was somewhat far. The soldiers' camp was situated to the side of the obliterated village for convenience. The other army personnel should have been next to the village to improve efficiency, but they decided to live a bit further and go through a bit of trouble rather than live near the village.

As the two neared the soldier's campsite, they heard sounds of quarreling from far away.

"You're actually ordering us to leave? Everybody in the town died but there are no leads on the murderer. In this kind of situation, you're still ordering us to leave?"

"Cedric, listen to me..."

"I don't want to listen to you! My whole family died here. I'm not leaving without finding the murderer!"

Mila subconsciously tightened her grip on Gong Hua's hand. She picked up the pace and soon saw Cedric and Owen.

Owen knitted his brows; Cedric was so angry that his face had become distorted. Cas stood on the side, looking as though he was about to cry.

The other soldiers stood on the sidelines, unsure of what to do. To them, Owen was their leader, but Cedric was also their important spirit charmer. They weren't people they could mess with.

Mila walked in. She knew this wasn't something she should set her foot in, so she only walked in to lead Cas away from the scene.

Gong Hua looked at Cas and found his eyes red again. He let go of Mila's hand and embraced Cas, even pushing Cas' head towards his chest.

Almost immediately, Cas embraced Gong Hua back and began to cry. Because his brother was still there, he didn't dare cry loudly. He tried very hard to suppress it, changing his sobs into small weeps.

Mila was surprised to see Gong Hua's actions. She didn't think Gong Hua, who didn't understand the things of this world, would know how to act this way. It seemed that Cas had truly taught Gong Hua many things these past days.

Thinking about this, she was even more determined to prevent Gong Hua from marrying Cedric.

Cedric furiously growled, "Let me tell you, Owen. Even if I die, I will not..."

Suddenly, Owen grabbed Cedric's collar and pulled him up, bellowing, "You listen to me, bastard! The Zangxia Gates have been breached and the Danyas have swept into Xi Zong! They are currently pillaging our homeland!"

Stunned by the news, Cedric paled and exclaimed, "What? Impossible! This can't be real..."

Owen grabbed a piece of paper from his pocket and threw it at Cedric, roaring, "This is an emergency order issued from Qifeng, calling all troops to return to the main army immediately!"

Cedric trembled as he scanned the paper. Owen was right!

Owen looked at the surrounding soldiers, all of them were panicked and worried. He couldn't help but sigh. He had originally planned to take the soldiers back to the main army without explaining anything, so they wouldn't have to worry. But he didn't know that Cedric would erupt in anger as soon as he had made the orders.

At this mess, Owen took an irritated tone, "We have to rush back tomorrow morning. If we're late, then we probably won't have an army to return to!"

Cedric had nothing to say and silently nodded his head.

Only after things seemed to have calmed down a bit did Mila walk up, lightly tugging on Owen's arm. Owen turned to her, breaking a pained smile, "Mila. It seems that our plans will have to be postponed."

"Don't worry." Mila shook her head, "If Zhan Yan was to be infiltrated by the Danyas, where would we live? We need to find a safe village along the way, and let someone take care of Cas and Gong Hua. They can't follow us into battle."

Listening to Mila talk about his little brother, Cedric remembered Cas. He quickly looked everywhere in search of Cas. He saw the soldiers' anxious expressions, and then found Cas in Gong Hua's arms, crying.

Now, Cedric truly understood what huge trouble he had caused. He lowered his head, and said regretfully, "I'm sorry. I was too rash."

"Don't worry about it." Owen patted his shoulders.

Mila opened her mouth, "Cedric, why don't we let Cas go with Gong Hua and me tonight? You probably wouldn't be able to take care of him after this."

As soon as she said that, Cas ran back to his brother, gripping his brother's hand tightly. No matter how much Cedric would reprimand him, he refused to let go.

Seeing this, Mila held Gong Hua's hand and walked to Cas, warmly saying, "Cas, we have to put you two in a village. But Gong Hua doesn't know anything and I'm scared the villagers won't understand her situation, so I want you to take care of her. Can you promise me that no matter what happens, you'll stay by her side?"

Initially, Cas planned on holding onto his brother's hand no matter what, but once he thought of Gong Hua, he hesitated.

Although he knew Mila was just using Gong Hua as an excuse to have him obediently stay in a village and not go into battle with Cedric, it was still the truth. There were many things Gong Hua still didn't understand. They couldn't just leave her alone!

But Cas didn't want to leave his big brother. His brother was the only relative he had left, and the battlefield was such a dangerous place...

Gong Hua looked at Owen and Mila, inquiring, "I can't follow you?"

Mila gently answered, "That's right, Gong Hua. You can't follow us onto the battlefield. It's very dangerous."

Gong Hua remained quiet for a long time before saying, "Are Owen and Mila abandoning me? Didn't Mila say she wouldn't abandon me? But now you are. I don't understand."

"I'm not saying that I'm abandoning you!" exclaimed Mila.

Gong Hua remained silent, thinking. The Leaves didn't say they were abandoning him either, but they left and refused to bring him along with them.

He looked at Mila, his chest feeling strange, as though, as though...

To hurt was like having your chest stuffed with boulders or punched and stabbed.

...Why do I cry? I cry because I feel sad

What was sadness? Why did you cry when you were sad? What did the salty water have to do with sadness?

Gong Hua still couldn't understand. He only wondered why his eyes were hot, and then something fell, streaking down his face... He touched his face with his hands and licked his finger.

It was a little salty, a little bitter... horrible-tasting water. It tasted even worse than the water in the cage he was trapped in.

Seeing Gong Hua cry, Mila felt sad and said, anxiously, "Listen to me, Gong Hua. We're not abandoning you. We're only putting you in a village for the time being! Once the battle ends, we'll go find you right away, okay?"

Yet, Gong Hua hung his head, touching the tears on his own face, tasting them. He said nothing.

"Gong Hua..."

Mila was still talking, but Gong Hua had stopped paying attention. It was all right even if he didn't listen to her explanation. He believed that she was abandoning him. Mila had said before that she wouldn't abandon him, but now she was... Whatever she was saying was just a lie anyways, so why should he listen?

Then suddenly, Gong Hua's hands were roughly clutched by someone. He couldn't shake them off no matter what.

Startled, Gong Hua lifted his head and found Cas grasping his hands.

Very seriously, Cas said, "Gong Hua, we'll wait together! My brother only has me left, so he definitely wouldn't abandon me! So, Owen-Ge and Mila-Jie will definitely come get you. They wouldn't abandon you."

A little perplexed, Gong Hua asked, "Cas won't abandon me?"

Cas nodded his head with might, voicing loudly, "Yes! I'll never leave you, and no one here is abandoning you! Owen Ge and Mila Jie are only leaving for a little while. They'd be by your side afterwards anyway. When we go play, they aren't there either! Owen Ge has to work every day and he leaves you every day, but he still comes back to see you in the end, doesn't he?"

"Comes back..." Gong Hua was silent for a second, and then turned to Owen and Mila asking, "You'll come back?"

Mila instantly embraced Gong Hua, nodding powerfully, "Yes! No matter what, we'll come back to find you!"

Now, even Owen hollered, "Really, do you have such little faith in me? Let me tell you, even if I have to crawl, I'll crawl back to you!"

Not understanding, Gong Hua asked, "What is faith?"

Cas immediately yelled, "Having faith is to believe that we won't abandon you!"

"Brat, good job!" Owen praised.

Have faith that he wouldn't be abandoned... Gong Hua looked at Owen, Mila, and Cas. When the three of them smiled at him at the same time, he suddenly understood what "faith" meant.

I have faith.

Chapter Four

Things Done Correctly Now, Things Done Wrong Before... Are They Wrong?

Before I understood the gravity of an everlasting promise,
the three people who had vowed to never abandon me
had already fulfilled theirs in different ways.
After I understood the weight behind everlasting promises,
I wished they had never promised me anything.

— Gong Hua

“Gong Hua!”

Gong Hua immediately opened his eyes, and as he turned around, he saw Mila rushing towards his bedside. She started to pull him up in a hurry.

He was shocked, since Mila had never treated him so roughly, nor shown him such an expression. She looked extremely anxious.

“Mila, what happened?” He asked.

Mila grabbed a dress nearby and speedily pulled it over Gong Hua’s head. She did it in an incredibly rushed manner. Before Mila was done zipping the dress, Gong Hua’s entire body was jerked from the bed. Mila then yelled, “Go!”

Gong Hua was dragged out of the tent by Mila. He was shocked speechless. He even wondered if he was being abandoned. But Mila gripped his hand tightly the entire time. *This isn’t a sign that they’re throwing me away, right?* He felt.

The situation outside the tent was chaotic. Everyone was hurrying to pack their things, and some soldiers were even waving weapons, yelling things like, “Stop packing everyone! Hurry and leave!”

Something felt wrong to Gong Hua. The terror-stricken faces of everyone around him, felt strangely familiar to him. There were even screams and distant gasps of surprise. *All of this, all of this...* was the same as that day!

Gong Hua stopped walking. He realized Mila was running towards the town. She wasn't heading towards where the soldiers were stationed, the camp, but rather moving unmistakably towards the town.

When he stopped, Mila also had to stop. Only when she turned around did she see something wrong with Gong Hua's expression. She readily comforted him, "Don't be scared. Everything will be fine. Owen will protect us."

"Owen said I wouldn't have to go to town." Gong Hua replied fearfully.

"I know." Mila continued, "But it's an emergency right now, so it's all right. We'll head there first, and then I'll explain everything to you, how's that?"

Gong Hua shook his head. This shocked Mila. Ever since she started caring for Gong Hua, no matter what she asked, Gong Hua would obediently follow and never refuse. Even so, she felt somewhat worried. Not resisting at all couldn't be a good thing... but, refusing to listen now was even worse!

"Gong Hua, it's too dangerous here. Come with me!"

Gong Hua still shook his head with all his might. No matter how hard Mila pulled him, he wouldn't move. The sheer impatience she felt at that moment almost made her cry. She just couldn't understand how Gong Hua had such strength when his body was so slender. Those soft fingers didn't appear like they've suffered through tough or even mild manual labor.

She yelled in a hurry, "Gong Hua, please hurry and come! The beasts are coming, a lot of them!"

But to Gong Hua, he couldn't understand what was so scary about beasts. To him, the town was much, much scarier.

"Gong Hua!"

Mila really didn't know what to do then, until a voice saved her.

"Mila! What are you still doing here?"

Cedric ran over. He had originally planned to check how far the beasts had advanced, but he didn't think he would find Mila and Gong Hua still here.

Mila looked as if she found her rescue team and hurriedly explained, "Gong Hua refuses to leave. I don't know why..."

In the middle of the sentence, she saw a change in Cedric's expression and stopped talking. She followed the direction of his gaze. There was a rising mass of smoke and dust coming from afar.

Immediately Cedric lifted Gong Hua and carried the latter in his arms, saying "Hurry" to Mila before the two of them started sprinting towards the town.

"I don't want to go!"

Gong Hua felt at his wit's end. He didn't want to step foot in that town, but Mila and Cedric were ignoring all his pleas. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to get out of Cedric's grasp, but he was also unwilling to leave Mila's side...

While he struggled with the two choices, they had already reached the town.

With a month's worth of renovation, the town wasn't actually that scary anymore. The scattered corpses were nowhere to be found, and the rubble from the demolished buildings was piled neatly by the side. Nonetheless, no matter how much they reorganized, the raw iron-like stench of blood still lurked around the area. Once they stepped in, almost immediately, the stench engulfed them without warning.

Gong Hua gripped Cedric's arm tightly, it was the only thing he could hang on to.

As Cedric and Mila ran past the town roads, scenes from the other day seemed to reenact themselves. He wasn't completely conscious at that time; it was as if his senses had all been replaced by pain. All he felt was pain, and he felt he had to do anything to lower that pain.

So, he used all his power, and screamed.

He screamed, and it was as though something had lunged out of his body. There were lots of noises around him, sounds of destruction, sounds of people screaming, many ear-stinging sounds. Crooked faces flashed again and again before him as well.

At that time, he didn't understand what those things were or what was happening, but now, he grew to understand... By the time he was awake, his eyes were filled with red, and the smell of blood, the smell of blood, the smell of blood...

After running halfway across town, a hillock suddenly showed up in front of the three of them. That was one of the sights people found miraculous recently.

Why would there be a hillock in the middle of town for no reason? It had to be the work of the culprit who had destroyed this town.... But just "what" could make a hillock like that?

Everyone was afraid of the hillock before, but not anymore. That hillock was the place where Cedric and Mila were running to. Once they saw the hillock, Cedric truly felt happy, but after running for a few seconds, he realized there was a huge problem... Climbing a mountain while holding onto a girl wasn't a laughing matter.

But at this point, he could only act like a hero and run up there like his life depended on it. But as he reached the top, his foot slipped and he almost ended up using Gong Hua as a landing mat until Owen appeared and supported the both of them.

Cedric heaved a sigh of relief.

Owen helped them up, and then hollered at Mila and them, "Where did you guys run off to?"

Cedric didn't have the breath to respond. After all, he had just run for his life while carrying a girl.

Not to mention, he wasn't a more-than-physically-healthy spiritmancer, but rather a spirit charmer who'd fall over with a breeze. It was just that he followed the army around a lot, and Owen kept nagging him to train his body, so his stamina was better than the usual spirit charmer... But by "better," he meant he could barely run one kilometer, and that was without a girl in his arms.

Gasping for breath, he uttered, "Be... beas..."

"The beasts are coming!" Mila helped him finish.

Hearing this, Owen furrowed his brows and said, "Mila, quickly take Gong Hua and hide in the back. Cedric, you... forget it, you catch your breath!"

Owen wanted to have Cedric report the situation, but seeing how he was dying from lack of air, he had to banish the idea.

"All soldiers, come to the top of this hillock and lie down! Do not alert the beasts!"

With that order, Owen saw the mass of smoke and dust. Instantly, he grabbed Cedric and forced both of them down.

Mila rushed in, sliding Gong Hua behind the hillock. All the military personnel had hidden there, including Cas. The latter saw them straightaway and rushed over. For a ten year old child, hiding in a destroyed town was a truly terrifying experience. Afterwards though, he saw the awkward expression on Gong Hua's face. He asked dubiously, "Gong Hua?"

Gong Hua raised his head to look; his eyes were tinted red and filled with terror. Seeing the other's expression, the fear Cas had in his own heart immediately dissipated. He hastily patted Gong Hua's back, whispering softly, "Gong Hua, don't be scared! My brother and Owen Ge will protect us."

Mila saw that and simply pushed Gong Hua towards Cas, so that she could take care of other matters. She started counting the people one by one.

Cas, noticing how Gong Hua still look scared, and immediately held the other's hand in a tight grasp. Through this action, Cas, himself, felt more reassured.

Gong Hua suddenly asked quietly, "Cas, I did something in the past, but now I think I shouldn't have done it... What is that called?"

Despite finding the question odd, Cas properly replied, "You made a mistake."

"What happens... when you make a mistake?"

Cas replied matter-of-factly, "If you made a mistake, just say sorry!"

Although Cas' tone sounded really assuring, Gong Hua still felt as though something was off. He asked again, "You just have to say sorry?"

Cas nodded forcefully, "Mhm! As long as I say sorry, even if Mom and Dad were really angry, they wouldn't be the next day!"

Gong Hua looked at Cas, and solemnly replied, "I'm sorry."

Cas was puzzled. He asked back questioningly, "Are you practicing how to say sorry with me?"

Gong Hua shook his head. Right when Cas was about to ask for details, a thunderous roar shocked him. He instinctively put his arms around Gong Hua and hugged the latter tight.

But, this roar was only a prelude of what was to come. Following it were various other types of roars as they were surrounded by the beasts.

Everyone's faces instantly paled.

The fear of the people hiding behind the hillock, who couldn't actually see anything, was far less than that of the soldiers up front. As soldiers, they should have been brave, but now distress showed on their faces.

However, no one could blame them. No one who had seen such a sight would.

Not far from the hillock, atop the roof of a half-destroyed house, a beast whose fur was glowing with a pale blue light stood. The area around it was crowded with many other beasts, numbering even more than the number of soldiers there.

Although he knew he was supposed to remain silent, Owen still couldn't resist asking Cedric, "What is that beast? I've never seen such a... such..." He didn't know where to start to describe that thing.

In reality, the pale blue beast wasn't very big, probably about the same size as the one he often rode. There were plenty of larger beasts that around it as well, but it emitted an impregnable presence, a presence not even beasts bigger than it had.

Its shape was similar to a wolf, but its fur was pale blue and emitted a chilly glow. At first glance, it seemed like an art piece sculpted from ice.

Yet, it was undoubtedly a living creature. Its six eyes moved to and fro on its face as its two whip-like tails swung in the air. From time to time, it would use its front leg to scratch its neck... or, more accurately, using the three winding black claws on its front leg.

Cedric let out a groan, "We're doomed. It's Nightclaw..."

"Nightclaw?" Owen asked in suspicion, "What is that?"

"A physical spirit... A beast physical spirit, one of the most blood-thirsty ones at that!" Cedric gave a distressed smile. "Stand up. It's already seen us."

Hearing this, Owen looked at the beast and almost jolted up in alarm. The six eyes of that "Nightclaw" were all facing their direction. Being glared at by those six black pearls, Owen felt a chill run up his spine, a chill as cold as ice.

Cedric stood up first and dishearteningly muttered, "Was it Nightclaw that destroyed the town? If it was, then everything makes sense. Only a physical spirit can make an entire town like this..."

Owen stood up in exasperation, but still suppressed his emotions. He softly reminded, "Cedric! What are you doing? Hurry and stand behind me and get ready for battle! This isn't your first time in battle. Do you need me to tell you?"

"Battle?" Cedric forced a smile, "Owen, that's a physical spirit... Do you have 'faith?'"

Owen felt annoyed, "Faith? You mean believing in the Spirit of War? What soldier doesn't believe in it?"

Cedric looked in Nightclaw's direction, and said calmly, "Then, that is the Spirit of War."

Once he finished, a wave of gasps surrounded them.

Owen instantly grabbed Cedric by the collar, pulling him to his eyes, speaking furiously, "You bastard! Are you trying to destroy the troop's morale? Have you forgotten that your brother's right behind us? So you're thinking of not doing anything and just letting Cas be eaten by the beasts?"

Cedric turned ghostly pale with those words. Although completely in a daze, he muttered, "No, no matter what, Cas can't die..."

"Good!" Owen gave out a direct order, "For Cas, release all of your 'soul spheres!' There are too many beasts. I'm afraid we can't block all their attacks."

Cedric nodded, and at the same time, a pale blue, semi-transparent sphere appeared from his chest, which then flew to the top of his head.

If a spiritmancer's weapons were blades and swords, then a spirit charmer's would be his soul spheres.

A spirit charmer's main attack was linking scattered spirits together, and then controlling those links to attack his enemies. However, linking spirits required a certain amount of time. The spirit charmer was at his weakest state during this time. Although spirit charmers often hid behind spiritmancers, in actual battle, enemies could appear from any direction, and their first target would always be the spirit charmer!

To handle the situation, spirit charmers usually prepared already linked spirits and hid them in their body. These linked spirits took the form of a sphere, so they were named soul spheres.

"Are you kidding me?! That's the Spirit of War! I'm not fighting that thing!"

One soldier yelled, then jumped down from the hillock and sprinted away. His leaving also bewildered the other soldiers.

Seeing that happen, Cedric wanted to slap himself in the face. This was all because of his foolishness!

"Settle down, all of you!" Owen bellowed, "If we could run, I would have already have taken all of you and left! This place is surrounded by the forest. If you think you can outrun the beasts, then leave!"

Not long after he spoke, a scream traveled their way. As there was no one else around, the scream could only have come from the soldier who had escaped. The scream proved Owen's words to be true. Every soldier present swallowed their desire to flee.

Although Owen was right, it made him more distressed than happy. He had planned to let Mila and the children run away even if he had to die... But everything had turned to shambles now. If even a trained soldier couldn't run away, how could women and children?

There was no place for them to retreat anymore. Owen could only observe the crowds of beasts surrounding Nightclaw and prepare for battle. But the more he looked, the more his brows furrowed. Although it seemed like there were only a few tens of beasts across from them, from the screams of that soldier earlier, it appeared there were many more hiding in the forests.

Owen had to prepare for the worst, and soundlessly asked, "Cedric, is there any way you can take the other military soldiers and leave? Even if we need to forfeit our lives!"

Cedric thought for a moment, and with a pale face, shook his head.

Honestly, if they were the usual strong opponents, he would have found a way to escape. No matter what, he would have gotten Cas to safety.

But their opponent now was Nightclaw!

In front of a physical spirit, the power of a spirit charmer was that of a child's!

Cedric had used up all his brainpower, yet he couldn't think of anything.

What could he do? Could he not even save Cas?

As Owen and Cedric watched Nightclaw, Nightclaw stared back at them.

Humans were not worthy opponents in Nightclaw's eyes, but something felt odd about this village. He felt that he had to act with discretion.

His original destination wasn't this small town but somewhere much farther away. However, the smell of blood surged from this place, and it seemed as though countless living creatures had died incessantly. It was most likely a warzone.

Nightclaw craved battle, but he loved a free lunch all the more. That was why he found wars to be perfect! He only had to watch the two sides slaughter each another with weapons, and corpses would start piling up one by one on the ground. By nightfall, he'd have a mountain's worth of food to feast on.

But halfway through his journey to the East, Nightclaw had been lured here by the smell of blood.

He could tell countless creatures had died here as soon as he stepped into this place. However, he was confused. This wasn't a place the war should have reached yet, not by far.

There was also a thick stench of blood flowing from the direction of those humans... Were they the ones who had caused the entire area to smell of blood?

Nightclaw remained still, but the beasts around him were becoming restless. Seeing this, he simply lay down and had them scout the situation.

With his authorization, the beast mob rushed out, charging towards the little hillock.

Some armed humans were on the hillock, and they were not about to just sit around waiting to die. Naturally, they too raised their weapons and retaliated. Nightclaw expected this. He didn't mind losing a few beasts. Rather, he saw it as an opportunity to eliminate the weaker ones.

Although the two humans had teamed up quite well, how could their level of skill block most of the beasts? Nightclaw was a bit skeptical, but he couldn't see anything special about those humans no matter how hard he looked.

He became slightly impatient some minutes later. He didn't want to go out into battle himself, but the smell of blood rushing at him from the Far East had been constantly fueling his hunger.

If not for the failure of the beasts to contain their hunger, forcing them to stop for a snack, there was no way he would've stopped for a few bunches of men.

Nightclaw stood up and took a large leap, landing directly at the bottom of the hillock. He followed with another few leaps, each shocking in length. He then hopped onto the hillock and roared.

Alongside the resounding tone of his roar came sequences of spirits bound in a massive swirl, like a hurricane blasting straight towards the hillock's apex.

Atop the hillock, Cedric hurriedly patterned his soul spheres into a net in an attempt to withstand Nightclaw, but his spirit net was vanquished immediately after the hurricane came into contact.

Without the spirit net's protection, he and Owen were knocked away mercilessly, rendering them unable to move. When Cedric forced himself to crawl back up and raise his head, he found he had been surrounded by the beasts...

"Ge!"

Cas screamed and dashed towards the hilltop. Even Mila couldn't stop him. She immediately lifted her skirt and chased after Cas with all her might. However, she still couldn't catch up.

Cas was immediately marked by a beast wholly coated in black fur, its tiny blood-red eyes fix on his prey. After confirming that Cas was harmless, the creature raced at him without hesitation.

Cas didn't notice at all. He only looked his brother's way and desperately ran to save his him. The fact that he was a mere ten-year-old child didn't seem to matter.

Mila noticed when the beast had come within a leap's reach, but there wasn't enough time. She could only hopelessly scream, "Cas!"

Mila's abnormal yell finally caught Cas' attention. He turned his head, but it was all too late. The enormous beast loomed over him as he futilely widened his eyes, watching the black-furred creature's mouth bearing down...

A large shadow suddenly shot from the ground, striking the beast and tossing it in the air.

Cas remained stunned for a while before identifying the shadows as vines... or rather, extremely big vines!

Subsequently, swarms of vine incessantly escaped the earth, spooling every monster into the air and flinging them away mercilessly. The humans who were on the mound, however, didn't receive the same treatment.

The soldiers gaped in horror at the vines everywhere, some were so shocked that they starting chopping at the vines. Soon, they realized the vines wouldn't harm them and were even pushing the beasts away to protect them. The expression on everyone's faces rapidly changed from terrified to doubtful.

"Ge!"

Cas rushed to Cedric's side, the latter was covered in blood and dirt. Although most of it was Owen and the beasts' blood, he had been injured quite heavily as well.

Cas quickly propped up his brother so that he could sit.

"Just what is happening?" Owen shouted while eyeing the vines around him. He felt that he was close to insanity. *First there's some random beast spirit, now there are tons of vines popping out?*

But he didn't have the time to clarify the situation, for Nightclaw had arrived.

Owen wasn't sure if it was any use at all, but he still raised his sword in preparation. Yet, Nightclaw didn't take notice of him. His six black eyes were all focused in one direction.

Noticing the unusual situation, everyone followed the beast's line of view... Gong Hua slowly walked over, vines dancing all about him but none harming him.

Nightclaw felt his hairs instantly stand up upon seeing this. Those six eyes were entirely fixated on Gong Hua. He was incredibly surprised. How could he not have noticed such a dangerous being at all?

"Gong Hua?" Owen felt rather confused, but was, for the most part, worried. It seemed Nightclaw was now onto Gong Hua.

"Owen!"

Cedric abruptly yelled as he saw a single beast leap onto the hillock, watching Owen and waiting for a chance to sneak attack.

Owen was stunned for a second, but when he turned his head, the creature's jaws were already right before his eyes. He cried out, retreating as he envisioned his own death... but the beast suddenly fell to the ground, struggling and whimpering.

Taken aback, Owen then noticed the vines strangling the bottom half of the beast's body, yanking it downwards until it completely disappeared beneath the ground.

The situation enraged Nightclaw. He roared at Gong Hua, shooting out hurricane-like spirits that stormed towards the other in a powerful gust.

Gong Hua didn't move or scream, a gigantic vine merely moved to block the hurricane. Nightclaw leapt onto the vine and started ripping at it maniacally with his black claws, shredding it to tatters.

Once the enormous vine was destroyed, the surrounding little vines started attacking Nightclaw correspondingly. These swift and agile little vines gave Nightclaw more of a headache than the big one, which made an easy target. No matter how fast he tore at the vines, he still couldn't overcome the rate at which they regenerated.

Nightclaw understood that to defeat a country one must first defeat its king, but he couldn't bring himself to attack this "king." Though these small vines looked so thin that they'd break with one jerk, once one vine entangled him, the others would interweave with it to create a tough chain.

These things gave him a headache, but they couldn't exactly harm him. On the other hand, Gong Hua made no move other than controlling the vines. The situation seemed to be at a stalemate.

The other people present gaped at the battle between Nightclaw and Gong Hua. They had backed away from the two, but continued to watch this unbelievable scene with blank expressions.

Only Cas continued to scream, "Go Gong Hua."

Cedric muttered with great incredulity, "How is this possible? Nightclaw is a physical spirit! Even the greatest spirit charmers can't battle a physical spirit alone... much less one girl?"

Saying this, he carefully looked at Gong Hua. No matter what, Gong Hua still looked no different from a girl...

The blue glow on Nightclaw burst out, obliterating more than half of the vines with a flash, giving Nightclaw the upper hand.

But at the same time, the tie on Gong Hua's evenly braided hair came off and his hair began to dance madly, looking no different than the vines around him. Masses of vines and tree branches exploded from the ground with the movements of his hair. Even when Nightclaw tried to use his blue light, he couldn't get rid of those threatening plants.

"Unless she's not just some girl!" Cedric finally understood and exclaimed, "Gong Hua is a physical spirit too!"

Suddenly, Nightclaw jumped up, carefully observing Gong Hua with his dancing hair, and cautiously asked, "What spirit are you?"

Gong Hua stopped as well when he saw Nightclaw halt his attacks. Only his hair was still moving. He replied honestly, "I'm a Flower."

"Flower?" Nightclaw didn't really understand.

Gong Hua elaborated, "Child of Tree, Flower of Leaves."

Nightclaw nodded.

As a species of the forest himself, he had heard about Flowers and knew they were guardians of the Leaf Tribe. Logically speaking, Flowers shouldn't deal with matters unrelated to Leaves. With this consideration in mind, Nightclaw spoke accordingly: "This is no more than our regular hunt. Our targets are the humans. We won't eat the Leaves. Take them and go."

He assumed that the reason a Flower would appear here was that there were Leaves amongst his prey.

Gong Hua shook his head. "There are no Leaves here."

Nightclaw felt somewhat confused. "If so, why are you here? Flowers exist as the Leaves' guardians. They have no connection with humans."

What Nightclaw said was the truth. Gong Hua knew it as well, but he couldn't leave. Cas and Owen were behind him, and Mila a little farther back.

There were no Leaves here. He couldn't voice the reason he had to protect these humans either and so remained quiet. Gong Hua simply explained the situation. "If you want to eat them, you must eat me first."

This slightly infuriated Nightclaw. He wasn't a spirit with a good temper, but he didn't want to fight with another physical spirit. Which was why he had put up with this for so long.

"Are you... the female Flower of Life?"

Although enraged, Nightclaw still wanted to make sure who his opponent was before attacking. He wasn't going to bother attacking and eating a weak spirit.

Gong Hua shook his head. "Gong Hua."

The male Guardian Flower!

Nightclaw narrowed his six eyes, calculating. *Is it worth it to fight a Guardian Flower for a mere forty humans... Actually, forget it!* A thick stench of blood drifted over from the East. He'd have an endless supply to feed there. Why should he fight a Flower now?

If the other was a Flower of Life, then it wouldn't matter... but Guardian Flowers were the Leaf Tribe's strongest protectors!

As they were a gentle tribe, the Leaves never developed offensive abilities. Even the physical spirit of their faith—the Spirit Tree, and the female Flowers of Life born from it possessed no offensive power.

However, Guardian Flowers were exceptions.

To protect the powerless Leaf Tribe, almost all their powers were attack-oriented. They were not spirits to mess with! Not to mention, they were in a forest now, which was basically the Flower's territory.

Here, no more than a few physical spirits could say that they'd be able to defeat a Guardian Flower.

Even though Nightclaw was a physical spirit of the forest as well, he couldn't be sure whether he'd be able to win against a Guardian Flower. At the same time, he found the situation to be strange. A Guardian Flower who protected humans?

"To us, this is only a detour." After considering, Nightclaw decided to forfeit the food here. He voiced a negotiation: "There is no need for us to clash. I will leave immediately, but you must not attack. Do you accept?"

Gong Hua nodded. "I accept."

Nightclaw was reassured. He knew Flowers were the physical forms of plants. Plants did not lie.

With a few leaps, Nightclaw left the hillock and gathered his horde with a roar. They then proceeded towards the East, where a much thicker smell of blood lay.

After Nightclaw had put some distance between himself and the humans, the vines began to coil back into the ground. Gong Hua's dancing hair slowly calmed... The next second, someone tackled him. Gong Hua waved his hand, about to throw the other person away, but noticed the one who tackled him was Cedric.

Gong Hua didn't know what to do, but Cedric had already raised his fist. Before punching him, Cedric saw Gong Hua's face—that of a girl, which made him pause for a moment... Then he hit without hesitation, the force of his fist so hard that Gong Hua fell over.

Before he could give a second punch, Owen had already caught him from behind, yelling, "Cedric! Are you crazy? Why are you hitting Gong Hua?"

Mila ran over to help Gong Hua to his feet, her heart aching from the red mark on Gong Hua's face. As she comforted Gong Hua with gentle words, Mila glared angrily at Cedric, but she didn't reprove him. She knew Owen cared for Gong Hua more than she did herself. If Cedric couldn't give them a proper explanation... No! Even if he could, wouldn't Owen still beat him up?

"You guys still don't understand?"

Cedric couldn't free himself from Owen's grasp, so he simply turned to face everyone, pointing at the town beneath the hilltop. Angrily, he roared, "Look at those vines! Look at the marks that left the town in shambles! She destroyed the town. She's the culprit!"

The people instinctively looked in Cedric's direction, where there was an elongated pit. They all recognized it. They had been here for two months, after all – they had all been studying those pits.

Originally, they had guessed fearfully that it might have been a giant snake monster, but now they understood. Those marks were trails left by the vines crawling through.

Even though they had finally discovered the truth, they didn't feel happy, not at all.

"She is the culprit!"

Everyone's faces dulled after hearing Cedric's hoarse cry. They didn't really want to believe it, but they couldn't say anything that'd disprove his words.

Cedric brushed off Owen's hand, inching closer to Gong Hua with every step. His expression crooked and voice rasping, Cedric thundered, "It was you... the one who killed my parents, the one who killed my sister and her newborn child!"

No one knew how to react, not even Owen or Mila.

Seeing Cedric approach, Mila immediately stood in front of Gong Hua in an attempt to stop him. But the most she could do was retreat as Cedric came towards them, his face distorted... She honestly didn't know how to block someone who was set on avenging his family.

Owen quickly called out, "Cedric, don't harm them..."

Cedric turned around, his eyes bloodshot, and interrupted with a fierce roar.

"Why didn't you say this for my parents? Why didn't you say this for my sister? Why didn't you say this for my sister's child? That child was a baby who couldn't even talk! Why didn't you speak up for them?"

Owen was rendered speechless.

Cedric grabbed Mila's arm and yanked her to the side, leaving only Gong Hua in front of him. He then released a soul sphere.

Although it was to the point that Cedric was letting soul spheres out, Gong Hua still stood without trying to dodge or retaliate.

More than the soul spheres, it was the look in Cedric's eyes that made him uncomfortable and even... scared.

But he didn't know why he should be afraid. There was no way Cedric could harm him. Gong Hua knew that, but it still didn't comfort him. He was really afraid.

The soul sphere's glow lit up half of Cedric's face, but left the other half in shadow. He didn't attack immediately but instead repressed his contorted expression, striving to withhold his screams. He spoke in a calm but wavering tone, "Tell me. Why did you kill my family?"

Gong Hua was unable to tell him why. By the time he had come to... everyone was already dead.

"Hurry! Give me a reason!" Cedric suddenly shouted; the controlled manner he held earlier completely gone. He yelled savagely, "Don't you have a reason for murdering my whole family? Or did you just accidentally kill them with a wave of your hand? Tell me..."

"Ge!"

Cas ran to Gong Hua, wrapping his arms around his elder brother, and yelled in determination, "The one who killed everyone wasn't Gong Hua. It definitely wasn't her! Gong Hua just got rid of the monster. She was the one who protected us!"

Once Cas said this, even Cedric who was certain started doubting himself.

"Cas..."

Hearing his name, Cas turned to see Gong Hua's swollen cheek. He apologized, "Sorry, my brother misunderstood. It wasn't you, right? You weren't the one who killed my older sister and her baby, the one who killed my Dad, the one who killed all those people... It was someone else who did it, right?! It had to be some other horrible person with similar powers to yours! My brother's just too dumb. He can't even think of this..."

Near the end, Cas even smiled at his brother's stupidity.

Gong Hua only looked at him and said sincerely, "I'm sorry."

Cas's smile froze on his face. He couldn't stop himself from questioning frantically, "Why, why are you saying sorry?"

Yet Gong Hua remained silent. He could feel it. If he said it, it would disappear... He couldn't pinpoint what it was that'd disappear, but he knew it would—the present, everything would...

While Gong Hua was quiet, the smile on Cas' face gradually disappeared, fading until it was gone. It was then that Gong Hua opened his mouth, "Because I've done something wrong. Cas, you were the one who told me that one should apologize if he did something wrong."

This time, it was Cas' turn to go quiet, but it wasn't for long before he asked again, "You really killed my older sister and her baby?"

Gong Hua genuinely replied, "I don't know if there was a baby or not, but everyone in this town was killed by me. If the baby was here, then it was most likely me who killed it. I'm sorry. I was in a great amount of pain back then... Cas, I said sorry. Would you forgive me?"

But Cas kept shaking his head and slowly stepped away. Taking his place, Cedric moved towards Gong Hua in hatred, "My enemy was right by my side, and I didn't know... This time, I will avenge my family!"

Cedric pounced forward, throwing his fists without hesitation. Gong Hua didn't dodge or hide. Despite being hit, he only shielded his hair, allowing Cedric to punch him again and again.

"Ah..." Cas was shocked to the core. Although he knew Gong Hua was the culprit, he still didn't want to see her hurt at all.

"Stop! Don't hit her anymore!"

Mila rushed to Gong Hua. Cedric didn't have time to stop and had no intention to either; so even after punching her a few times, he showed no sign of stopping. He did so until Owen held him back and dragged him away.

Cedric screamed rabidly, "Let go of me! Let go! She's the culprit. Didn't you hear?!"

"Don't be crazy! Culprit or not, are you going to force Gong Hua to fight back?" Owen spoke into Cedric's ear as quietly and quickly as he could. "Even if we all went up against her, we'd have no chance! Do you want to die? Do you want Cas to die with you?"

If he was alone, Cedric probably would have charged ahead without a care whether he'd win or lose. But right now he wasn't alone. He still had Cas... No matter what, he must protect Cas!

Putting him into consideration, he barely managed to suppress his anger. He turned around and brought Cas into his arms. Hugging his most important person, the one thing he couldn't lose. Only then could he stop his hands from doing something else... like taking revenge.

Owen walked over to help Mila up, and asked worriedly, "Are you all right?"

Mila shook her head and pulled Gong Hua up as well, patting the dust off his body.

Gong Hua just kept repeating "Sorry." Other than that, he didn't know what else he could do.

"Sorry?" Cedric immediately erupted, "Can one sorry replace the lives of my whole family?"

"Enough! Don't talk anymore!" Owen yelled loudly, "Mila, get your people to care for the injured soldiers. We'll leave in a bit."

Mila nodded. Seeing everyone looking at Gong Hua with fright, she simply took Gong Hua and left.

While Gong Hua was being dragged away, he kept turning his head to look at Cas. However, Cas cried in his brother's shoulders, not lifting his head even once.

It seems saying sorry wasn't enough after all...

Gong Hua lowered his head. He sort of knew since the beginning, but he still had hoped that Cas would act like he'd said he would... As long as he apologized, Cas would forgive him for killing the baby.

To keep everyone from feeling anxious, Mila led Gong Hua inside the tent. After wiping his face, she went out to help the others.

It was a terrible battle. Even though Gong Hua came to help in the end, they had lost ten people, and many were badly injured.

Mila carefully bandaged one patient, and while searching for the next, she caught a glimpse of Owen sitting idly by a tree, his arm mutilated.

"Owen..."

Owen remained in a daze for a couple of seconds before lifting his head to Mila, the latter looking at him with a worried gaze. He was silent, then spoke, "I'm fine. Go tend to the others first."

Mila looked at his arm. A piece of flesh was missing, but the blood had stopped so it truly wasn't that serious. She nodded and turned to leave.

"Mila!" Owen yelled. But when Mila looked back, he stayed silent for a while more until he asked, "Gong Hua, what is she doing?"

"Nothing. I got her to wait in the tent."

"Is that so?" Owen wiped the sweat off his face, but could do nothing to relieve his fatigue or erase the hopelessness from his voice, "Just what should we do? Mila, what should we do? Why must it be her?"

Mila couldn't muster up any ideas either. Gong Hua had massacred a whole town. This fact remained unchanged.

Why would a kind, innocent child like Gong Hua be the culprit?

Mila pondered with a heavy heart but could only suppress the pain, "Owen, I'll continue to bandage everyone. We shouldn't stay here for long. The earlier we leave the better."

"Mm."

Mila walked away for a bit, but suddenly found Cedric moving towards Owen to discuss something. She couldn't help but feel uneasy about this, but there was nothing she could do. Upon seeing Cedric, though, she thought of Cas.

Where was Cas? She looked for him left and right, until she found Cas sitting blankly by another tree, looking in some direction... where Gong Hua's tent was.

She couldn't help but feel sad upon seeing this. Regardless, Cedric probably wouldn't let him see Gong Hua anymore. It was a pity, since they got along so well.

"Mila."

Mila paused and looked up to find Owen and Cedric, the two of them very grim.

"What is it?"

Owen handed her a small bottle saying, "Mila, go make some soup. Add some more meat in there, then pour what's in this bottle into it and... feed the soup to Gong Hua."

Mila's mind went blank for a moment but she didn't take the bottle. She asked warily, "What is it?"

Cedric calmly replied, "A sedative. She'll just go to sleep after eating it."

Mila's face immediately sunk. She cried in discontent, "You two actually want to drug Gong Hua?"

Cedric reciprocated immediately with anger, "She's killed so many people. Does she not... not have to receive judgment?"

Mila didn't want to believe Cedric. Granted, it was just a sedative, but who'd know what Cedric would do to Gong Hua after she falls asleep? From his face, it seems he'd just kill her with one slash!

"Mila, just do as Cedric says." Owen spoke wearily, "We can't have Gong Hua awake and running about. The others refuse to follow us with her around, so this is our only choice."

Mila thought for a moment. It sounded like the right thing to do. If they didn't have something to settle the others' hearts, their only alternative was probably to abandon Gong Hua. They couldn't do that! She grudgingly agreed, "All right! But you must promise me. Before Gong Hua receives her judgment, you can't lay a hand on her!"

She emphasized her last words by giving Cedric a menacing glare.

Still uneasy, Mila said again, "Owen, you'll protect Gong Hua, won't you?"

Owen fell silent, then nodded in agreement.

With Owen's pledge, Mila took the small bottle and went to make soup. Most likely because no one wanted to see Gong Hua walking around, many generously contributed valuable ingredients for the soup.

The ingredients were abundant, but Mila couldn't bring herself to be happy. Being able to make a good soup for Gong Hua was a small comfort.

In the end, when Mila saw a pot of aromatic meat stew in front of her, she truly didn't want to put the drug inside. But Cedric stood by her the whole time, clearly monitoring her work. She felt a bit frustrated, but asked, "How much do I put in?"

"Everything." Cedric replied promptly.

"Are you sure?" Mila questioned suspiciously. She was honestly afraid Cedric was secretly trying to poison Gong Hua.

Cedric nodded, asserting impatiently, "She's not human! I still doubt whether the amount here will be enough for her to sleep a day!"

Mila was skeptical hearing this. Be that as it may, she poured the contents from the bottle into the pot, quietly hoping that the flavor of the sedative wouldn't be strong and thus ruin the soup.

Just as she was about to bring the soup into the tent, Cedric called out, "Take her here to drink it."

Mila glowered, close to losing her temper... But Cedric growled out, "This is for your own good! If she doesn't immediately fall down and realizes something is off, she might kill you."

Mila shouted back, "Gong Hua definitely wouldn't kill me!"

Cedric articulated, enunciating each word, "She killed an entire town, including the infants!"

Mila wanted to defend Gong Hua, but when she heard the word "infant," she couldn't say anything.

She only turned around, walked over to the tent, and lightly called, "Gong Hua! Come here for a bit."

The tent flap opened and Gong Hua walked up to Mila. He face was expressionless and simply looked around to see the various faces he recognized: Mila, Cedric, Owen a bit farther away, and Cas even farther.

Mila passed over the soup. Repressing her inner guilt, she forced herself to smile and said, "Here, Gong Hua. Drink the soup and then we have to leave."

Gong Hua took the soup, obediently took a sip, and then stopped drinking.

Was it possible that the sleeping medicine was really bitter? Mila was uneasy and even turned to glance at Cedric. His face was resolute, not allowing her to back out. At this point, everyone started to pay attention to the situation with uneasy expressions.

Seeing this, Mila only continued to persuade him, "Gong Hua, be good. Finish the soup."

Gong Hua looked at Mila, then turned his head to look at Owen, who stood in the distance. The latter turned his head away when he saw Gong Hua looking at him. Gong Hua also looked in Cas' direction. Cas looked back, his expression blank.

"Gong Hua, what is it?" Mila felt uneasy, but because she didn't want to be forced to leave Gong Hua, she tried to persuade him. "Listen to me, please drink the soup."

Gong Hua's attention returned to Mila. He apologized again, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to kill the baby. I was in so much pain back then... Mila, are you going to abandon me?"

Mila didn't understand why Gong Hua would be in pain before, but she felt her heart ache when Gong Hua asked if she was going to abandon her once again.

I absolutely can't abandon this child! Mila affirmed her belief again. She smiled and said, "Good girl. It's fine as long as you know your mistakes. Don't worry, I won't abandon you. Quickly, finish the soup and then we will leave 'together.'" She placed extra emphasis on "together."

Gong Hua was silent for a moment but then nodded slightly. Then he ate every mouthful of broth with grave seriousness, not leaving a single piece of the meat or a drop of soup behind.

After he finished eating, Gong Hua lifted his head to look at Mila. She took the bowl from his hands but didn't leave. She was worried that it would be bad if no one was there to catch Gong Hua when she fainted.

Mila waited for Gong Hua to say that she wanted to sleep or for her to simply fall down, but neither of those happened. Instead, blood started dripping out of Gong Hua's mouth. Though it was blood, it was different from a human's scarlet blood. Gong Hua's blood was a dark red, the same color as his eyes.

Although the trail of the dark red blood was thin, it flowed down his chin and past his neck, leaving a shocking trace on his exceptionally white skin.

Mila's eyes widened, not understanding what was happening at all.

Gong Hua suddenly coughed twice. It wasn't just traces of blood in his mouth any longer. He coughed up blood, one mouthful after another, so much that it caused him to choke and cough even more severely.

With the sound of Gong Hua's coughing and the rivers of blood gradually dying his jacket red.... It suddenly dawned on Mila.

She'd been tricked! It wasn't sleeping medicine hidden in the soup. It was poison!

"Gong Hua!"

Gong Hua looked around. It looked like the person who shouted was Cas. Cas ran towards him, his expression filled with panic and grief. Immediately, though, he was caught. He struggled a bit before realizing it was Cedric that was stopping him. Cas stopped struggling, not daring to run over.

He only looked at Gong Hua and continued to cry.

Then, Gong Hua looked towards Owen. Owen was the first person to pick him up and treat him well. But Owen turned his head away, avoiding his gaze.

"Gong Hua!"

Dazed, Gong Hua turned towards the source of the voice, but his sight was becoming fuzzy and he couldn't focus his eyes. But within his blurry vision, Mila's face suddenly grew and became clear.

She held him closely.

Chapter Five

The Wrong Choices Before, The Correct Choices Now...Are they correct?

If Owen had never found me, if Nightclaw hadn't passed by,

If Owen hadn't lied to Mila about the poison...

No! The things we believed to be coincidental were usually meant to be. Going back and changing choices would only lead to a worse outcome.

If Owen had never found me, then Nightclaw would have probably killed them and turned them into food for the beasts.

If Nightclaw hadn't passed by, I would still be forced to show my powers sooner or later.

If they hadn't poisoned me, I would still be sentenced to death in court.

— Gong Hua

Mila said anxiously, "Hurry. Use your powers to block everyone. We'll leave. We'll leave together!"

Gong Hua quietly questioned back, "Together?"

"Together!" Mila embraced him, vowing never to let go.

Unable to understand, Gong Hua asked, "Mila, you gave me the soup. Was it not to kill me?"

Mila was stunned, her expression changing immediately. She cried, "You knew there was poison in it?"

Gong Hua nodded.

Then why did she still drink it? Because I told her to? Mila's heart ached so much she wanted to slap herself.

"Mila!" Owen ran to her while shouting, "Don't be crazy! Come back!"

Seeing this, Mila screamed, "Don't come over here! Gong Hua, don't let anyone come near us!"

Two large vines pushed through the ground and blocked Owen, but this caused Gong Hua to cough again, dyeing his chest red with blood.

Seeing Gong Hua coughing up blood incessantly, Mila screamed, "Owen, I was wrong about you!"

Owen stopped in his steps. Hearing her accusation, he couldn't hold it in any longer and shouted back, "I didn't want to kill Gong Hua either! But she killed a whole town's worth of people. She'll end up dying even if she was brought to court! They will lock her up in a cage and let everyone throw rocks at her before hanging her in public! If that's how it will be, I'd rather she die a less painful death now!"

Mila knew what Owen said was true, but she still couldn't accept it. Even though she couldn't think of a solution herself, she couldn't accept Gong Hua being poisoned to death!

"No matter what, you shouldn't have poisoned Gong Hua!"

"Then, are you just going to let the murderer of a whole town run free?" Cedric roared in rage. "She killed my parents, my sister's family, and everyone else in town. Did those people deserve to die?"

Remembering the lost lives, Mila felt helpless. She could only plead, "Can't you just let Gong Hua go? She didn't mean it, I'm sure of it... She saved us!"

"As long as I'm alive, I won't let her go!"

When Cedric finished, he spread his arms into a horizontal line, the light between his hands formed into a long blade.

Seeing this, Mila panicked and held Gong Hua up, trying to take him away. "Hurry, we'll leave!"

Gong Hua looked at the spirits in Cedric's hands and made a gesture. A vine about an arm's thickness sprang from the earth and wrapped around the two of them, taking them away from the crowd.

"You're not allowed to leave!" bellowed Cedric while his blade-like chain spirits shot out. With a tilt, the vine dodged the attack.

"Gong Hua!"

Cas? Gong Hua looked back and saw Cas running toward him shouting, "Gong Hua! Wait!"

Cas...

Gong Hua stopped. He watched Cas, hoping that the latter would leave with him like Mila.

"No!"

Mila suddenly exclaimed and shielded Gong Hua with her entire body. While Gong Hua was still wondering what was happening, his vision was abruptly filled with red... The spirit blade Cedric shot out had hit Mila's back.

Mila lifted her head and panted, "Gong-Gong Hua, listen to me. Hurry and leave. I beg you, hurry..."

At that point, Mila couldn't support herself anymore. Her legs gave out and she fainted.

Gong Hua held Mila up, vines bursting from the earth behind him. They intertwined to form a dense net, blocking everyone who was following them.

The vines took the two away very quickly. Behind them were many voices: Owen's shouting, Cedric's enraged bellows, Cas's crying... but Gong Hua did not look back anymore.

Gong Hua didn't know how much time had passed. It didn't seem very long to him, but he knew it was different for humans. So he stopped and asked the person in his arms, "Mila, should we keep going? Mila?"

Mila didn't reply right away, but Gong Hua was very patient. He asked her again and again until he finally heard Mila speak. She whispered with a raspy voice, "Water..."

Gong Hua understood. It wasn't a difficult matter for him to find water, especially in a forest. He quickly found a lake and placed Mila near it. He cupped his hands to collect water and carried it over to Mila. She quickly turned her head and drank the water greedily.

This shocked Gong Hua in the beginning. He didn't know Mila liked water so much. He continued to watch her but he suddenly noticed that something was different about Mila!

Her complexion used to be the color of honey, but now it was pale... like his hands.

Gong Hua didn't know what to do. He asked, "Mila... Are you okay?"

Mila didn't hear him and continued to drink.

Seeing this, Gong Hua didn't ask any further. He was hungry too, but as he saw Mila clutching his hands for the water, he thought he wasn't that hungry. He could wait until Mila was done.

Mila suddenly choked and started coughing.

Gong Hua hurriedly patted her back to help. Mila did the same thing when he had thrown up after eating food before.

Mila coughed for a long time before stopping, but she still didn't look very comfortable.

Gong Hua placed her head on his lap and lowered his head to watch her.

Settling into the position, Mila saw Gong Hua looking down at her. Gong Hua wore a worried expression. Although it was too light for a distressing situation like this, Gong Hua's worried expression was already much better than his utterly expressionless face before.

Mila was pleased and smiled. "Good child."

Gong Hua had destroyed an entire town—even the infants had died by her hands. No matter how one looked at it, she wasn't a good child. It wouldn't be wrong to call her a monster for the crimes she had committed.

Yet, she truly was a good child.

Anyone who had known Gong Hua for more than three days would understand that she was a good child. Mila believed in this wholeheartedly. She didn't understand how the

town's tragedy came to be, but she knew that it wasn't Gong Hua's intention. This child would never hurt anyone! She wouldn't!

Due to her agitation, Mila's eyesight suddenly turned dark. Shocked, she waved her arms in an attempt to find her vision.

Gong Hua hurried to pat Mila's back asking, "Mila, you, do you want more water?"

Mila gasped in pain from being patted. Her back had been struck by Cedric's spirit blade, mutilating it.

However, the intense pain made her vision slightly clearer. Mila felt a bit faint, but she also felt a bit more clearheaded.

"Stop patting... Gong Hua, listen to me well. You must follow what I will tell you to do. Promise me."

Gong Hua nodded without hesitation.

"Good child."

Mila smiled and held out her hand. Although she felt weak, she made every effort to raise her hand and touched Gong Hua's face. She caressed it while speaking, "Gong Hua... Leave this place! As far as possible... Go to another country. Anywhere."

"Okay." Gong nodded. He didn't know where the other countries were, but Mila would tell him, so it was going to be fine.

"Remember to change your name. Don't use Gong Hua."

Gong Hua was taken aback after hearing this instruction, but he still nodded obediently. "Okay."

"Don't let Cedric catch up to you."

"Okay." This time, Gong Hua replied very quickly. He didn't want to see Cedric either, or more precisely, Cedric's horrific expression.

"Don't go looking for Owen and Cas..."

Gong Hua was truly shocked this time. He couldn't look for Owen and Cas? But the only people he knew were Owen and Cas... It was all right, he still had Mila.

At that thought, Gong Hua became relieved. Although he really liked Owen and Cas, they didn't seem to like him anymore. More importantly, the one beside him now was Mila. She was the only one who truly didn't abandon him.

Gong Hua nodded and assented again, "Okay."

After he replied, Gong Hua remembered another promise... He had promised Mila that he would protect Cas before. If he wasn't by Cas' side, how would he protect Cas?

"But Mila, I have to protect Cas. If I'm not with him, I can't protect him... Mila?"

Halfway into his question, Gong Hua realized Mila had closed her eyes, as if asleep.

He shoved her shoulders gently, murmuring, "Mila, are you asleep?"

Mila showed no reaction.

Gong Hua panicked, but soon calmed down. He said in an understanding tone, "It's all right. Mila can sleep first. Once you wake up, we'll leave this place and go somewhere far away. To another country."

I'll wait...

Sometimes, Gong Hua lifted his head and looked at the sky. Other times, he would lower his head and watch Mila. Besides that, he occasionally drank water from the lake. Gong Hua had nothing to complain about his life right now. His only worry was that he couldn't follow Mila's orders to go somewhere far away and leave this country.

He stroked Mila's sunflower-colored hair.

"I have to leave this country, but Mila keeps sleeping... It's okay, the vines are very fast. Mila can sleep for a while longer. Once Mila wakes up, I'll have the vines take us away from here, very, very quickly."

"Gong Hua!"

Gong Hua was stunned. He turned around to see Owen and Cedric nearby, the two of them tired and covered in dust.

Owen looked as if he was in a trance. The person who called out to Gong Hua was Cedric.

Gong Hua thought he was saved upon seeing Owen. He had completely forgotten Mila's instructions to avoid Owen and hurriedly called out, "Owen! Mila slept for a long time. She keeps sleeping. Why does Mila keep on sleeping?"

Owen only stared blankly at the person in Gong Hua's arms.

Cedric walked up and said coldly, "She's dead. Can't you tell? The corpse has already started to smell... It's not like this is your first time killing someone. Stop pretending!"

Dazed, Gong Hua looked down at Mila. She was shockingly pale. Even her lips had turned purple.

Her appearance wasn't important to him then. Gong Hua had killed the residents of a whole town, but he had never really paid attention to what a corpse looked like... Truthfully, he didn't know what dying meant back then.

As for the town's destruction, Gong Hua's only memory of it was a sky dyed red... and the smell. He didn't know what a dead person's body looked like, but he could recognize the smell.

Mila was emitting the smell of the dead, a corpse's smell.

"You killed Mila..."

Gong Hua was surprised and turned to look at Owen, but discovered that the latter was talking to Cedric.

"I didn't!" Cedric yelled in agitation. "The one I wanted to kill was her, this murderer! Mila only died because she rushed up to protect her!"

Owen's expression turned livid after hearing this. Cedric also stopped talking and explained worriedly, "That's not what I meant, I just..."

Owen scoffed coldly and walked over to Gong Hua. "Gong Hua. Put Mila down."

"Don't go over there. It's dangerous!" Cedric warned.

Owen paused and then continued again. He said to Gong Hua, "Give Mila to me."

"No." Gong Hua hugged Mila to him. He then stood up and repeated the instructions Mila had left him: "Mila told me to leave this country. She told me not to let Cedric catch up. She told me not to see Owen and Cas. She told me not to use the name Gong Hua..."

He mumbled this again and again as the vines wrapped around him. He turned to leave.

Owen hastily shouted, "Gong Hua, don't go!"

Gong Hua heard him. He knew Mila had told him to avoid Owen, but he couldn't help but turn his head. To be honest, he didn't want to leave. At a loss, he asked, "But Mila said not to go find you. She told me to go to another country."

"Is that what Mila said? She did that for you." Owen gazed gently at Mila. She was his woman. Although she had never given birth, she had died protecting a child.

"Mila, this is all my fault. Even though I'm a man, I'm not as strong as you. The things I've promised, I didn't do. You promised you would never abandon Gong Hua, and you truly upheld that promise..."

As Owen spoke, he saw a spirit blade strike Gong Hua, a large amount of blood gushed out where the blade had struck. Gong Hua had been knocked away by the blow, tumbling to the ground. Mila's body also fell out of his arms.

Stunned, Owen immediately knew who was responsible. He hollered furiously, "Cedric! What are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" Cedric gave a cold smile. He then roared back, "This girl killed my parents, my sister's family, the whole town. Tell me what I should do other than kill her!"

Like before, Owen could not answer.

Cedric ignored Owen and watched the fallen Gong Hua. He hooked his ten fingers again, trying to collect more energy.

Owen saw Cedric create more spirit blades with his hands, so many that they were enough to shred Gong Hua into a thousand pieces. Owen didn't care what was right or wrong anymore, what was revenge or not. He yelled, "Gong Hua! Hurry and leave!"

Gong Hua hobbled back up. The spirit blade had directly hit him, creating a wound stretching from his left shoulder to his right leg. But because he was holding onto Mila's carcass, the attack didn't injure the vital areas around his chest. He didn't feel relieved from this and instead crawled to Mila's body in horror, uttering worriedly, "Mila, Mila..."

But after a short while, he remembered. Mila was dead. She'd never reply to him again.

Gong Hua stopped calling out to her. He endured the pain and held Mila up, but as he did so, her body split into two.

Gong Hua did not want that to happen. Before he could react, the two parts of Mila's body fell to the ground. He stood there, stupefied, and could only look up blankly. "Owen, Mila broke..."

What Gong Hua saw wasn't Owen but Cedric's raised hands. Three large spirit blades hovered above those hands. Cedric looked down on Gong Hua and callously sentenced, "Then you can snap in two like she did!"

The spirit blades fell down.

Gong Hua's eyes widened as he saw a silver sword pierce through the heart of the man in front of him. The spirit blades that were about to strike dissipated. The silver sword was then pulled out of Cedric's body. The latter fell onto the ground. Standing behind him was Owen, who was holding onto a blood-stained sword.

Owen glared at the person on the ground, his face ashen. "Cedric, you shouldn't have touched Mila."

He then watched as the light left Cedric's eyes. His convulsing body gradually stopped moving...

Gong Hua looked at the blood-stained sword and couldn't help but ask, "Owen, are you going to kill me too?"

Startled, Owen bellowed, "What dumb thing are you saying..."

Halfway through, he noticed Gong Hua watching his sword. He looked down to see blood dripping from the blade. Only then did he realize why Gong Hua had asked such a question. He quickly threw away the sword.

He then turned to see Gong Hua staring straight at him. Gong Hua explained, "Cedric cut Mila into two. That's why Owen killed Cedric. But Cedric said Mila only died to protect me, so is Owen going to kill me too?"

Owen was taken aback. He couldn't answer Gong Hua's question. If Gong Hua were to ask for the reason, it wasn't exactly Cedric's fault that Mila died... but Owen couldn't forgive Cedric's actions. Even if she had died, Cedric shouldn't have maimed her body like that!

"Captain?"

Owen stiffened. He saw two soldiers and Cas walking out from the forest, their eyes rested first on the people on the ground, then moving blankly to Owen and Gong Hua.

"Ge Ge?" Cas recognized that the fallen person was Cedric, and fell into a daze.

The soldiers looked terrified as they faced their captain. One of them asked in panic, "Cap-Captain Owen. What happened here?"

"Ge Ge?"

While the soldiers inquired about the situation, Cas had already run up to Cedric's side. He laboriously flipped over the body. Upon seeing his brother's face, he was so shocked that he

fell down. He looked at Owen completely horrified. Owen's eyes were wide open... wide open, but unfocused.

Anyone could tell that he had killed Cedric.

"Captain, isn't that sword yours?" The soldiers looked scared but voiced in disbelief, "Could it be that you, you killed..."

Although they'd asked a question, their expressions and retreating footsteps indicated that they already know who the murderer was.

The panic slowly left their faces as the noise of other soldiers neared. The two looked at one another and began to call out loudly, wanting to attract the others here.

Seeing how the situation was in a state of disrepair, Owen clutched Gong Hua's hands and pulled the other to him. However, Gong Hua yelped in pain and fell to the ground.

Owen simply carried him altogether and started dashing into the forest.

"Gong Hua!"

Cas's voice! Gong Hua immediately turned his head. Cas was looking straight at him, his expression helpless and perplexed. Gong Hua suddenly recalled how Mila had told him to protect Cas.

If Gong Hua wasn't there, how could he protect Cas?

At this point, Owen had already left the lake and was in the forest. In the midst of the situation, Gong Hua finally thought of something.

If he left the mark of a Flower on Cas's body, then at least anything inside the forest wouldn't hurt him.

Gong Hua waved his hands, and a vine, the size of a finger, popped out. It moved toward Cas. His intention was to mark Cas's arm and leave a Flower's mark there.

However, Owen noticed this and grabbed Gong Hua's hands, shouting in panic, "What are you doing? Don't attack Cas!"

With Gong Hua's hands restricted, the vine also lost its direction. It didn't touch Cas's arm but instead scratched his left eye.

"Ahhh!"

Cas covered his face and wailed as blood seeped through his fingers.

"Cas!" Gong Hua cried out in shock and struggled to get down and go see him.

People were closing in on them now. Owen had no time to stop and worry about Cas. The only thing he could do was to take Gong Hua away from there as fast as possible. So, he held onto Gong Hua tightly and rushed into the forest without even looking back.

Gong Hua watched Cas cover his face with his head lowered. Blood dripped through the cracks between his fingers and fell onto Cedric's corpse...

That was the final scene of their parting.

Chapter Six

Lin·Yin Qie Zi·Omi...Who?

After leaving the Tree for so many years,
I had gained many beautiful memories, as well as many painful ones.
But the memory that resounded endlessly in my mind was still that one single, most painful
moment.

—Gong Hua

“Yin Qie Zi? Yin Qie Zi?”

He slowly opened his eyes, but couldn’t really focus his vision. A blurry image of a person came into his sight. The person calling him was, was... Owen.

Zhan · Owen · Paladin—the only son of Warlord Paladin. He had displayed tremendous talent in martial arts as a child, managing to defeat adults at an age of twelve. Soon, he had become Zhan Yan’s most famous spiritmancer. That was why, at just seventeen, he had been given the title of “Warrior.”

The Country of Zhan Yan bestowed on its people with the titles Warlord, Marshal, Glaive, Warrior, and Soldier. Although Warrior was only the second rank up from the bottom, Owen’s age and the lack of war in recent times had made the achievement of his title rather remarkable.

Owen was going to turn eighteen this year. Warlord Paladin had been busying about, trying to get his most beloved child the title War-Glaive before his birthday.

“Yin Qie Zi?” Owen waved his hand in front of Yin Qie Zi.

Yin Qie Zi finally snapped out of his daze and shoved Owen’s hand away, coldly saying, “It’s all your fault.”

“My fault?”

Owen glared. Right when his bullheaded temper was about to act up, Yin Qie Zi pulled out a clear bottle and swirled the maroon liquid in front of him.

Taken aback at first, Owen then appeared ecstatic. He yelled, “You were able to make it? You really made it? My god... I can finally report back!”

He swiped the bottle and stared at the maroon liquid; the more he looked, the more he couldn't let go of the bottle. He couldn't help but hail, "The color is brilliant! Brilliant!"

"It took me an entire night to make!" Yin Qie Zi snappily responded. "The next time you forget something, only to remember it the day before the deadline, I am definitely not going to help you!"

"Don't say that. You're like my best friend!" Owen chuckled and said understandingly, "No wonder you were slumped over the table in deep sleep. I've never even seen you sleep before..."

Seeing Yin Qie Zi glare at him, Owen knew he had said something wrong again. He hastily changed the topic, "What can I say, women are just so troublesome. I mean, the Queen's brown hair isn't bad at all! Why must she dye her hair? And it just has to be the color of Xia Lan¹⁶ flowers too. She's forcing the entire nation's spirit binders to scramble around like chickens just to make a bottle of hair dye for her."

"Not everyone is beautiful as your sister," Yin Qie Zi dully replied, "It's not a sin to want to look prettier."

"I honestly don't find the color of orchids all that beautiful... My sister's golden hair and your silver-purple hair look way better."

As he spoke, Owen unconsciously reached out to touch Yin Qie Zi's neatly plaited braid. The other person caught his wandering hand with a furious expression.

Owen was shocked, and then recalled how much Yin Qie Zi loathed other people touching his hair. He quickly apologized, "Sorry! I honestly forgot! I'm so sorry!"

Yin Qie Zi glowered and warned viciously, "Don't do it again!"

"Okay!" Owen smiled, but still couldn't stop himself from mumbling, "I just don't get it. It's just hair, why are you overreacting... All right! All right! I won't do it again!"

"Even though you say that, you've broken your word many times already!" Yin Qie Zi icily added before reaching out. "I've given the dye to you already. Now pay up!"

Owen grumbled, "You're a bit too practical, aren't you? I just got here! I haven't even gotten to say a few words, and you're asking me for money? Aren't you even going to serve me a cup of water?"

"I'm a spirit binder. I make my living by selling elixirs and medicine. If you want my elixirs, then you have to pay," Yin Qie Zi explained bluntly. "This was an urgent job, and the difficulty of the job was extremely high. The price was supposed to have been raised multi-fold, but seeing as you're a regular of mine, I'll just ask a hundred gold coins from you!"

"Are you a robber?" Owen almost jumped and yelled, "A bottle of hair dye costs a hundred gold pieces?"

¹⁶ 夏兰, summer orchids.

Yin Qie Zi rolled his eyes. "Do you think this is a regular bottle of hair dye? Why don't you try and ask other spirit binders to make it the color of the Xia Lan flowers? Why don't you also tell them the deadline is tomorrow?! If you don't want it, then give it back to me!"

Owen quickly stuffed the bottle into the folds of his clothes. "I want it. Of course I want it! Just write it down for now! And while I'm here, give me fifty bottles of healing medicine, and twenty bottles each for speed, strength, and defense. I'll count it all up at the end of the month."

Yin Qie Zi furrowed his brow and said, "I can manage the fifty bottles of healing medicine, but I can't make so many of the other ones. The most is ten each. If you wait until the first of next month, I can meet those numbers."

"Okay, just give me whatever you have for now!" Owen answered generously, "I'll get someone to pay beforehand at the end of the month. Just take your time making the rest."

Yin Qie Zi felt something was odd and inspected Owen up and down. He asked suspiciously, "Why do you want to buy normal medicine from me? Weren't you always complaining about how much I was charging, and would only come to me for elixirs other people can't make?"

"I really can't hide anything from you!" Owen laughed, but Yin Qie Zi remained silent. Owen awkwardly stopped chuckling and began to explain, "The quality of elixirs recently has gotten quite messy. Even some guys who've not passed the spirit binder exam are making them on the go. Though their quality isn't as good, the price is really appealing, so many stores still import from them."

"That's not anything new," Yin Qie Zi said lightly. "I've already told you a long time ago. My medicine is expensive because the quality is definitely better than other stores'."

Owen scratched his face and admitted, "That's true. But before, I could buy pretty nice medicine from other stores that were only slightly more expensive. Their quality was about the same as yours. But now, the situation's changed. The medicines are obnoxiously uneven in quality, and everyone's quality just keeps dropping overall. Even if I were willing to pay a high price, there might still not be anything good around."

"The truly good medicine can't be sold, so even qualified spirit binders are starting to care only about quantity, not quality. This is a vicious cycle. I've already told you."

"Yes, you've told me before." Hearing Yin Qie Zi's words, Owen felt slightly downcast. "It seems my dad is also frustrated about this situation lately."

Hearing this, Yin Qie Zi dully responded, "This shouldn't be one of the things Warlord Paladin should be worrying about, right?"

"What are you saying!" Owen bellowed, "The army is a huge buyer of healing and assist medicine! Although the medicines they can buy right now are cheap, their qualities are terrible! They can only heal minor scratches! Because of this, my dad almost beheaded some of his subordinates... If I hadn't told him about how it's impossible to buy good medicine right now, he really would have sent them to die."

"I see." Yin Qie Zi nodded. He understood Warlord Paladin's headache now. If this problem persisted, then all the medicines on the market would become ineffective, which would in turn affect battles greatly as well.

Owen suddenly turned to Yin Qie Zi, beaming a wishful look at him, "Yin Qie Zi, could you maybe make more..."

"Don't count on me!" Yin Qie Zi knew what Owen wanted to say and immediately cut him off, rejecting him. "I'm only one person. I can't provide them to you in big batches. Plus, you already know, making normal medicines are side jobs to me. My interests lie in the specialized medicines."

"I know." Owen nodded his head. "That's why my dad sent me to buy as many as possible from you. At least then, the soldiers responsible for ordering the pills can tell the good from bad."

Yin Qie Zi gave a laugh, and said, "You trust me that much? Aren't you scared my medicines are no good either?"

"Of course not," Owen answered sincerely. "Don't think I'm blind. I've taken your medicine before, and the effects were unbelievable. If I were to go into battle, I definitely wouldn't choose any medicine but yours! But... there aren't any wars lately. I'm only dueling within the city, and your medicine's honestly too expensive. My heart already hurts from buying those small amounts I'm saving for the more important fights."

Yin Qie Zi snapped back, "Medicine isn't meant for you to eat like candy in the first place! If you want to duel, then you need to face the consequences. Just lie in bed a few days and you'll be healed. Why are you would take medicine for that?!"

"Heheh," Owen chortled before hurriedly saying, "Let's not talk about dueling! Let's talk about business! Supply me with fifty bottles of healing medicine and twenty each of speed, strength, and defense every month."

"I can't." Yin Qie Zi refused right away, "Healing pills are one of the bestsellers. It's only because I have some saved up that I can provide you with fifty now. I can't do that anymore after this!"

Owen scratched his head, and asked, "Then how many can you make?"

Yin Qie Zi thought for a moment, "Fifteen bottles of healing pills, five bottles for the rest."

"That's too little!" Owen protested.

"Hah." Yin Qie Zi laughed. "And I'm going to raise the price. Let's double it!"

Owen's mouth gaped open, "You, you..." Even after a while, he still couldn't draft a complete sentence.

"That's what you get for ignoring me when I warned you back then," Yin Qie Zi said coolly. "Now I'm the only one with a quality guarantee. You don't have the right to bargain with me."

Owen opened his mouth, wanting to argue. But he had to admit, Yin Qie Zi did warn him a long time ago. He thought for a moment, before grudgingly pulling out the friendship card. "We've known each other for so many years already. You don't have to be so cruel, do you?"

"Or more accurately, we've known each other for almost a year," Yin Qie Zi said impatiently. "Do you want it or not? There are quite a number of stores waiting to see whether I'm selling to them!"

Owen's eyes widened, and whispered in disbelief, "Quite a number? Where'd they come from?"

Yin Qie Zi sent a look at him and sneered. "You didn't think you were my only customer, did you? All the apothecaries in Qifeng know about me. They've bought quite a few bottles of healing medicine from me. I'm just not sure if they went and sold them, or if they kept it for themselves."

Owen was stunned. Before he could ask, Yin Qie Zi had already started explaining, "Those vendors have sold medicine for many years so they're well aware of a medicine's quality. They might not be selling mine, but they'd at least buy some for the house, especially the healing medicine."

Owen thought for a moment and understood. He nodded. "The price of your medicine is really high, so reselling them would make no profit. However, there's no arguing about the quality. That's why they buy it and keep it for themselves in case of emergencies! There's no such thing as a waste of money when you're using it on yourself, isn't it?"

Hearing Owen's interpretation, Yin Qie Zi gave the former a rare smile of approval.

"Even if the price's doubled, they're still willing to buy it?" Recalling the price raise, Owen's heart started aching again.

"They only pay one and a half times more.

Owen screamed "Why!" once he heard this.

"Because I didn't warn them, but I've warned you." Yin Qie Zi responded coldly, "I warned you, yet you still didn't buy more for backup. You disregarded my words completely, so you deserve this! Now tell me, are you buying or not? Stop wasting my time!"

"I'm buying," Owen surrendered.

After departing from Yin Qie Zi's storefront, Owen turned around after walking a few steps. Yin Qie Zi was leaning beside the door, and nonchalantly waved when he saw Owen turn around. His entire person appeared really lazy, as if he didn't care much about anything.

Other than him, there were many other pedestrians who had taken notice of Yin Qie Zi. The man's appearance was very eye-catching. Not that he was overly handsome or ugly, but because he had a head of silvery-purple hair. Humans didn't have that hair color, so Yin Qie Zi stood out.

That was why Owen couldn't avert his eyes when he had first met Yin Qie Zi... To be honest, no one on the entire street could stop themselves from looking at Yin Qie Zi's hair.

It wasn't until Yin Qie Zi had moved into his current home and hung his signboard saying "Spirit Binder" that everyone had calmed down.

It wasn't surprising for spirit binders to have unique hair colors, since they were the ones who made hair dyes.

Although Owen still found it to be strange.

His mom had also been a spirit binder when she was alive, and his little sister later studied up the topic. So he had some basic knowledge on spirit binding as well. Silvery-purple wasn't a color any regular spirit binder could come up with.

After his interest was perked, Owen used the simplest method. He walked into Yin Qie Zi's shop and ordered for a bottle of silvery-purple hair dye.

Yin Qie Zi looked at him, and responded plainly that the color was created by accident. He couldn't make it anymore.

There was no way Owen believed that. To create a relationship with the guy, he even resisted the heartache and bought a few bottles of medicine... When he first heard the price, he almost thought Yin Qie Zi was being difficult on purpose.

But after he used it, Owen couldn't believe how incredible the results were. That was that. But after he had his sister inspect the medicines, she actually told him to get involved with Yin Qie Zi... His sister was the type who liked to live as a hermit and almost had no interest in other human beings! Of course, those weren't her original words. She simply asked him to get in touch with the other person more.

Since his little sister ordered it, Owen worked hard to form a relationship with Yin Qie Zi. He had to pester the other for half a year before he agreed to talk about his hair color.

Apparently, some of his ancestors were from the Leaf tribe, so he was born with that hair color. The reason why he could make medicine of such high-quality at a young age was also because of his bloodline... The Leaves always had good spirit vision.

Of course, that was according to legend. The Leaf Tribe had left the continent of Sisha twenty years ago. No one could confirm with them now.

"Yin Qie Zi!" Owen yelled.

Yin Qie Zi glanced lazily at him in a form of reply. He didn't even bother asking, "What is it?" which made Owen quite mad. He had lost count of how many times Yin Qie Zi's nonchalant attitude had infuriated him this past year.

"My little sister Mila's birthday party is in three days. Are you interested in attending?"

Yin Qie Zi raised an eyebrow. Owen knew the other man had no interest whatsoever, so he quickly added, "I know you're not fond of noise, but my sister really wants to meet you. And you know her; she can't really step out of the house..."

Yin Qie Zi was silent. He then asked, "Why does she want to meet me?"

Owen hurriedly recited his prepared speech, "My mom was a spirit binder when she was alive, so she taught my sister a lot about spirit binding. She's always admired your medicines, and so she wants to meet you."

Yin Qie Zi monotonously replied, "I don't have any formal attire."

Owen said almost immediately, "I already prepared one for you!"

Yin Qie Zi rolled his eyes, and said sarcastically, "I thought I had the right to refuse!"

"Of course you do!" Owen responded, and put on an imploring expression. "But my sister really, really wants to see you. She's turning eighteen this year, and I'm also eighteen this year, so can't you meet her for my sake? Just treat it as your birthday present for me..."

Yin Qie Zi irritably cut him off, "Okay, okay! Whatever, as long as you shut that mouth of yours!"

"Thanks!" Owen was thrilled. "I'll have someone send the outfit to you in two days. On the day of the banquet, a carriage will come pick you up. Remember to bring a birthday present for Mila..."

"Leave!"

Owen had only taken a few steps when a black carriage stopped in front of him. The doors opened, and inside sat a person of around thirty to forty years old, meticulously groomed and dressed.

"Hi, Yehv," Owen greeted as he climbed onto the car.

Yehv smiled, "Young master Owen. Judging from your expression, it seems the matter's been dealt with successfully."

"Hah! Of course." Owen untied the scabbard from his waist, placing it atop the chair beside him. While doing so, he continued with a smile, "Dad is finally willing to let Yin Qie Zi meet with Mila, and Yin Qie Zi also agreed to go."

"Miss Mila will be very happy to hear that."

"Yeah!" Owen said helplessly, "Having a sister with no desires... it's hard for a big brother to give her a good present."

Yehv teased, "But for Miss Mila, it's not hard for her to find something you'd like."

"That's true," Owen agreed. "She hates people fighting and killing each other, yet her brother, me, is a spiritmancer who specializes in doing just that. Yehv, do you think Mila would be giving me a weapon this time or a batch of medicine?"

Yehv chuckled, "Young Master Owen, to tell you the truth, I do indeed know the answer to this question. However, I'm not going to tell you."

"Ah! Even though you're my butler, you're hiding things from me?"

"Ah..." Yehv assumed a sympathetic expression and said, "Young master, I truly do not wish to hide anything from you, but Master and Madam have told me Miss Mila's orders supersedes yours. As Miss Mila had forbidden me from telling, then I can only do so."

Owen rolled his eyes, complaining, "You heartless person... And I even remember to give you some of Yin Qie Zi's medicine every time I buy them. Next time, I'm definitely telling Fenny about your evil crimes!"

Hearing his wife's name, Yehv laughed out loud. He joked, "But Fenny listens to Miss Mila more than I do! If you're to tell on me, I'd still rather listen to Miss Mila's orders. Fenny might even give you a good lesson on how to obey Miss Mila's orders."

Hearing this, Owen grumbled again, "Everyone dotes on Mila. Even my butler listens to her. What is this!"

"Young master, don't you dote on Miss Mila yourself?"

"...That is true."

Owen had sent the outfit a days before, but Yin Qie Zi hadn't bothered opening the box until right before the banquet. He could feel the garb's smooth texture and soft luster once he lifted it. The outfit was made of silk; there was even an ornate pattern on it. It was apparel truly fit for nobles.

Yin Qie Zi looked in the mirror, picked up a brush, and started combing his hair. As usual, he spun it into a neat, tight braid. He knew, as long as he kept his hair neatly, other people wouldn't casually touch it out of curiosity... with Owen as the only exception.

Bang!

Yin Qie Zi tossed his comb away, and moved his hand to his waist, where a blade as long as his palm was concealed.

Owen rushed in, yelling loudly at the same time, "Yin Qie Zi... Wow! Clothes really do make the man. You look more like a prince than First Prince Edward himself!

"Owen?" Yin Qie Zi dropped his hand, and asked perplexed, "Isn't it your sister's birthday today? Why do you still have time to run here?"

"Ah... Of course it's to pick up my good friend!" Honestly, he was afraid that this good friend of his would ditch the party. If that were the case, then it meant his present would have been flung out the window. However, Owen didn't dare to tell Yin Qie Zi the rest of his reasons.

Yin Qie Zi scanned him suspiciously, but ended up noticing Owen's outfit instead. His formal attire was a navy military-styled suit. The fabric appeared well-made and durable, but lacked a shine to it. It looked like his usual wear, simple and poised.

Owen's outfit rendered Yin Qie Zi a bit speechless. He lowered his head to look at his own extravagant outfit, and then looked at Owen's simple attire. He asked in confusion, "Why do my clothes look more expensive than yours?"

Owen froze for a second, and hurriedly replied, "It doesn't matter how expensive it is. The important thing is that it suits you!"

"So you're saying I suit silk and lace?" Yin Qie Zi laughed scornfully, and purposely adjusted the lace under his collar before picking up his comb again to brush his hair.

Of course the present had to be covered in pretty gift-wrap. "You suit detailed clothing." Owen somehow managed to come up with a sensible reason.

Yin Qie Zi didn't care for that barely acceptable explanation and instead asked, "Are there any taboos?"

"What?"

"Taboos of the royalty!" Yin Qie Zi finally finished tidying his hair and turned around. "As in, who can't I get close to? Who shouldn't I talk to? Manners when eating? Are there..."

Owen quickly shouted, "No, nothing! My family's from the military, not like those genteel aristocrats from the central. If it's anyone else, then there might be some things to look out for, but you look more like royalty than I do, so there's nothing you need to do."

"What do you mean I look more like royalty than you?" Yin Qie Zi rolled his eyes. "I'm just a simple civilian!"

After seeing Yin Qie Zi all dressed up, and the regal vibe he gave off, Owen frankly couldn't agree with the other.

Yin Qie Zi glanced out the window, and pressed, "It's about time. It'd be rude to be late."

"That's why I say you're like an aristocrat..."

"Shut up!"

"... A bossy aristocrat!"

"I may be bossy, but I'm not an aristocrat!"

The two continued their pointless banter as they stepped out. At the door, they almost bumped into someone, a person wrapped tightly from head to toe in a black cloak.

Owen knitted his brows when he saw a veil covering the person's face. It was nearly evening outside, but the black cloak looked overly thick. It was something people would wear during winters. There was simply something off about the person in front of them. Owen moved his hand slightly over to the sword around his waist.

Just then, Yin Qie Zi voiced unhappily, "Why did it take you so long to get here?"

The person in black kept his head hung low and stood with a humble posture, remaining silent.

"You know him?" Owen was somewhat surprised.

"Mm," Yin Qie Zi explained minimally, "my servant Litelli."

"Servant?" Owen said astounded, "How come I've never seen him before?"

"It's because I always send him out to collect special ingredients for my medicine. Owen, get in the carriage first. I still have to give him some instructions."

Owen nodded casually, and climbed into the carriage.

Yin Qie Zi moved a few steps away. Litelli followed.

Once Yin Qie Zi turned to face Litelli, he directly asked, "Has it been dealt with?"

The other person flung his arms open, discarding his respectful stance from earlier, and replied in a cheeky manner, "Of course!"

"Good, then go home." Once finished, Yin Qie Zi promptly started to leave.

"Hey, wait!" Litelli said abruptly, "I have some news for you! My tribesmen told me to make sure it gets to you, or else they'll lock me up! It seems someone's been asking around about you in our tribe, but they're not sure for how long this has been going on. My people are always so slow at doing anything."

Yin Qie Zi stopped walking, and with a frown on his face, tried to recollect his memories. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find any connection between him and Litelli's tribesmen. Who would want to find him?

Litelli dug about his body, and scooped out a piece of paper. He recited the words on it verbatim. His tone was like he was reciting a textbook, "It is a man with a scar on his face. He does not look gentle in nature, so please be careful. Sincerely, the Tribe of Servile Spirits."

A man with a scarred face? Yin Qie Zi grimaced while thinking. Litelli looked up at the carriage, and let out a surprised cry, "Oh hey! You really achieved your goal. That must've not been easy."

Hearing him, Yin Qie Zi stopped his thoughts at once and icily voiced, "Quiet down! I've told you, if there's even one small possibility of you ruining my plans, you'll have to go back to your tribe!"

Litelli immediately lowered his head and deliberately put on a modest tone, "Don't drive me away! I promised to serve you, and I've been good so far, haven't I? If you chase me away, then even my tribe wouldn't want me!"

Although he kept saying "you¹⁷," anyone could tell Litelli meant no respect in his words.

Yin Qie Zi stood silent for a second, then said dispassionately, "Go inside. Have some healing and assist medicine ready before I'm back."

"Yes." Litelli nodded forcefully, and obediently walked in the house.

Yin Qie Zi watched Litelli go inside and close the door. He didn't get on the carriage right away, instead he continued to watch the shut door in a daze, deep in thought...

Owen poked his head out a bit impatiently, and yelled, "Yin Qie Zi, are you done yet? We're going to be late!"

Yin Qie Zi came back to his senses. He turned around and gave a faint smile.

"All right, I'm ready."

¹⁷ The "you" Litelli uses here is the formal you 您 (nin).

Chapter Seven

The Color of Sunflowers...Is Memories

There were many times when I made the wrong choices.
Though looking back on them, even if time was rewound, I would make the same mistakes
once again.
Since in reality, I had no other choices at all.

—Gong Hua

When Yin Qie Zi stepped out of the carriage, he had expected to see a swarm of people, since Warlord Paladin had his own spiritmancer regiment—the Racing Flame.

The Warlord's son Owen was also the only student of Chris, the commander of the other Xialan corps, which meant that two of the country's spiritmancer regiments were under the Warlord's control. Due to this, the Warlord Paladin was like the shining sun in the sky, even the king himself didn't dare invoke his anger.

Warlord Paladin was known for spoiling his daughter Mila, so if one wanted to ingratiate oneself, Mila's influence couldn't be ignored.

Yet the carriages in Yin Qie Zi's sights were sparse; the amount of guests was even fewer than the ones attending a War-Glaive's birthday banquet.

"There don't seem to be many people?" Yin Qie Zi turned to Owen with doubt.

Owen nodded, and explained, "Only some of the family members were invited. Mila doesn't like crowds or strangers, so we don't usually invite a lot of people to birthday banquets."

Yin Qie Zi nodded.

It might have been easy for normal girls to celebrate their birthday in peace, but that was not the case for Warlord Paladin's daughter. For his daughter to celebrate her birthday quietly, Warlord Paladin would have had to turn down many important officials, and those important people were definitely not accustomed to being rejected.

Warlord Paladin really did dote on his daughter. Yin Qie Zi couldn't help but smile.

Yin Qie Zi walked up the staircase and, in doing so, attracted many people's attention. Everyone stared at his silvery-purple hair, though the noises they made were mainly sighs of awe.

The attendant at the door said respectfully, "Please hold out your invitation."

Though Owen did give him an invitation, Yin Qie Zi hadn't brought it...When the young master came especially to pick him up, was there still any use for an invitation?

Owen walked up hastily, and said, "He's with me."

"Master Owen." The attendant suddenly noticed, and immediately said, "You're finally here; just a few moments ago, Miss Mila sent someone to see if you were back yet."

Owen cried out "Damn it," and immediately grabbed Yin Qie Zi. "Yin Qie Zi, come with me quickly!"

Usually, Yin Qie Zi would have slapped away Owen's hand due to his dislike of being touched by others, but this time he allowed Owen to drag him inside. He was pulled all the way to the grand hall, and along the way they aroused the attention of almost everyone. Many people called out Owen's name, but he only continued to reply "My sister's looking for me. I have to get over there quickly."

All the people who heard his reply smiled. They didn't mind Owen's discourtesy. Instead, they glanced curiously at Yin Qie Zi.

Yin Qie Zi maintained a placid face while being dragged away. After being led into the hall, even though many people stared at him, he continued to act indifferent. Instead, he studied the hall itself. Even though it was a birthday banquet, the decorations weren't luxurious, only white roses were placed around the hall.

With the white roses, light blue table cloths, and matching curtains, the hall was very refreshing and cozy.

Yin Qie Zi only looked up again when Owen yelled "Mila! I'm back!" As Yin Qie Zi was being dragged, he turned his head in the direction that Owen was walking. He saw a golden-haired girl in a wheelchair, smiling while talking with a man.

After hearing Owen's shout, Mila turned around and looked at her brother. She glanced curiously at the person beside her brother...Upon seeing her, Yin Qie Zi stopped and stared blankly.

Many years had passed since then. In addition, he had been quite clueless about everything at that time. He had long forgotten Mila's appearance, but there was one feature of hers he could never forget: her sunflower colored hair.

The Mila in front of him suddenly laughed. Her hair was the color of sunflowers, and even her smile was bright like sunflowers. Smiling, she said, "Hello, it's nice to meet you, I'm Zhan · Mila · Paladin."

Owen nudged him with his elbow, and said in a low voice, "Hey, answer her! My sister's talking to you. Are you deaf or something?"

Yin Qie Zi finally came back to his senses. The first thing he saw was the man beside Mila sniggering quietly. Seeing this, Yin Qie Zi realized his discourtesy and immediately felt somewhat awkward. "Hello, I'm Lin · Yin Qie Zi · Omi."

Mila first looked at her brother in surprise, then immediately replied to Yin Qie Zi politely, "Oh? I have long since admired your name." After replying, she smiled at Yin Qie Zi, as if waiting for something.

This made Yin Qie Zi hesitant, and he couldn't help but look towards Owen, but Owen was also in shock. Mila could only desperately glance at the man beside her, hoping to signal her brother...Owen blinked a few times before raising his hand to greet the man. "Hi Edward. What have you gotten my sister this year?"

Edward replied teasingly, "Really! Mila, you don't need to specially signal your brother! I thought that I had finally succeeded in becoming transparent, and I was truly enjoying my rare moment of transparency."

...Prince Edward?

Yin Qie Zi blinked, and then finally noticed the gentleman beside Mila. The other's clothes weren't particularly splendid; they were even plainer than the ones he had on...so *that* was why so many people had been staring at him along the way!

Yin Qie Zi secretly cursed Owen in his mind, and hastily bowed. "Nice to meet you, Your Majesty Prince Edward, I...this humble civilian... am Lin · Yin Qie Xi · Omi." He had thought about it for a while, but still couldn't figure out what he should refer to himself in front of the prince, so he only managed to put a "humble civilian" in.

Edward smiled mildly, and replied, "You don't have to be so polite. It's fine to just call me 'Edward.'"

Yin Qie Zi didn't really think that he could call the prince by name, but he also didn't know the right way to speak with royalty, so he could only remain silent.

Thankfully, at that moment, Owen opened his mouth and said, "With your title as Your Majesty the Prince, who could act as if you were transparent? Answer my question, what did you end up getting my sister?"

Edward replied somewhat helplessly, "Isn't the gift already in Mila's hands?"

Mila held up the hand mirror in her hand with a smile. The hand mirror was white and emitted a gentle glow. The circular frame had white roses carved along the edge, and in the center of the mirror's back was a water-blue, round gem.

Owen sized up the mirror, and said, "Well, I guess this gift is acceptable."

Edward overheard him, and said ill-humoredly, "Acceptable, really! This mirror was carved from the tooth of the Snow Beast of the North. And in order to buy it, 'Your Majesty the Prince' will probably have to pass the entirety of the next month by only eating porridge."

"As if eating porridge is pitiful... Back in the days when I went training with Mr. Chris, we could only eat the prey we hunted, and if we didn't catch anything, there wouldn't be anything to eat!"

"Okay, okay! You only went training with Commander Chris once, but you've been talking about it for three years!"

Owen and Edward's quarrel surprised Yin Qie Zi. Even though he had heard that Mila, Owen, and the crown prince were childhood playmates and very close friends, he didn't think they were this close.

Would this affect my plan? Yin Qie Zi pondered with a frown.

"Isn't it astonishing?"

Yin Qie Zi paused, and turned his head to look at Mila puzzledly. Mila smiled at him. "Isn't elder brother close with Edward?"

"We're not close!" Owen and Edward spoke simultaneously.

"Right?" Seeing them oppose it vehemently, Mila grinningly said. Yin Qie Zi could only nod in agreement.

Seeing Yin Qie Zi's silence, Mila deliberately brought up a topic that he could discuss. "After seeing all the efficacious medicine that you've made, I believed that you would be an old, experienced spirit binder! I didn't think that you would be so young, perhaps even younger than Owen and I am."

Yin Qie Zi said hastily, "I'm already 23 years old."

Owen continued, "But because he has such a childish face, he looks like he's only 18."

Mila laughed, while Yin Qie Zi rolled his eyes at Owen.

Edward asked somewhat curiously, "So you're a spirit binder? Ah... Are you the spirit binder who created the summer orchid hair dye?"

Yin Qie Zi nodded.

Now Edward was curious, but just when he was about to speak, Owen pulled on his arm. He turned around, puzzled, to look at Owen. The young master only winked at him, which made him even more bewildered.

"Is it okay if I consult you about some knowledge on spirit binders?" Mila started, and then hastily explained, "I only want to know some general knowledge. If it's a secret recipe or a special proportion, you don't need to tell me. I know that only spirit binders' students can ask their teachers about such things."

"I don't have any special proportions," Yin Qie Zi said straightforwardly. "Spirit binding, in truth, is only about the differences of comprehension and control of the spirits. As long as your spiritual vision is powerful and you have enough knowledge about the natural spirits' colors, you just need to adjust the quantities of the different spirits slowly. You will definitely be able to recreate the color of the summer orchid."

Mila nodded, and inquired, "So in contrary, even if you know the proportion of the spirits, if your spiritual vision isn't powerful enough, you still won't be able to create the summer orchid hair dye medicine?"

Yin Qie Zi thought about it for a moment, and then answered earnestly, "Not necessarily. Some spirit binders don't have the power to continuously test the type and quantity of the natural spirits that are needed to create the color of the orchid flower. But if they knew

the proportion in advance, it's possible that they could just make it directly. The proportion of natural spirits for the summer orchid is not very difficult."

"So we only need to know the proportion to make any kind of medicine?" Mila's expression was somewhat confused, since Yin Qie Zi's explanations were a bit different from traditional spirit binding knowledge.

Yin Qie Zi shook his head, and said, "No, it's not like that. Some proportions are very meticulous, so meticulous that someone without a powerful enough spiritual vision wouldn't be able to adjust the natural spirits' binds and links correctly."

"So that's how it is. Thus, in the end, we still have to return to the differences in the strengths of one's spiritual vision?"

"There's also the ability of binding and linking spirits..."

"I'm completely lost." Seeing the two chatting vigorously, Owen couldn't help but scratch his head and mutter complaints. But in reality, he didn't have any actual complaints and was truly happy to see the two chatting so energetically.

However, while happy, he didn't plan to stay beside the two of them and continuously listen to their incantation-like "chatting." Owen called the prince over, and they snuck away together. "Come on, Edward, let's get some food for Mila and Yin Qie Zi! Looking at them, if we don't get them anything to eat, they'll probably chat 'til they starve to death."

Although Edward followed Owen, he couldn't help but protest, "Haven't you made a mistake? I'm the crown prince, not an errand boy!"

"For the sake of the birthday girl, please help me get some food. Is this okay now?"

Hearing this, Edward finally nodded. "Fine, for Mila's sake."

"Hey! I'm Mila's twin!"

"Wait, if you say it like that, then...ah! It's also *your* birthday today?"

"..."

After Owen and Edward were out of sight, Mila immediately apologized. "Sorry, my brother must have forced you to come, right?"

Yin Qie Zi hesitated, not knowing how to reply.

Mila clapped her hands together, and asked with an imploring expression, "Please don't get mad, Owen has been telling me many things about you for the past year, so I had guessed that you're someone who doesn't like crowds. You must've been forced by Owen to come."

Yin Qie Zi was silent for a moment. He then asked, "Does my appearance here make you happy?"

Mila stared at him for a moment. Although she thought that the person in front of her was rather abrupt, it matched Owen's descriptions of Yin Qie Zi: direct, blunt, antisocial, and etc.

Mila nodded. She didn't dislike his abruptness.

"That's good," Yin Qie Zi said directly. "If you have any questions about spirit binding you can ask me. I'll definitely reply, so long as I know the answer. You can treat it as my birthday present to you! I'll also give you a bottle of medicine, whatever kind you choose."

"One bottle of medicine and whatever questions I want to ask?" Mila couldn't help but smile. "Generally speaking, wouldn't medicine be gifted, and secrets kept instead? Or is it because it's my birthday today, so I'm allowed to ask whatever I wish?"

Yin Qie Zi thought about it for a moment, and then answered honestly, "I'll only give you a bottle of medicine today, but you're free to ask any questions anytime you want, not only today."

"You're really strange!" Mila smiled faintly. "If every spirit binder was as gracious as you are with their secret techniques, then no one would want to be a spirit binder's student anymore."

Yin Qie Zi scratched his face, and said somewhat confusedly, "Owen also says that a lot, but I don't understand what's so strange about me..."

Mila said teasingly, "Isn't someone who can ignore the Prince strange enough to begin with?"

"I didn't recognize him..." Yin Qie Zi replied awkwardly, his reason somewhat far-fetched. Since this was the capital city Qifeng, the king and the prince's portraits were visible everywhere, so it would be hard *not to* recognize them.

Mila smiled but didn't speak; she had asked the question intentionally. When they first met, she had clearly seen Yin Qie Zi's blank expression when he had looked at her.

"I heard that you created the summer orchid colored hair dye the queen wanted? It seems like dyeing your hair is very popular right now! Perhaps I should ask you for a bottle of special hair dye."

Yin Qie asked confusedly, "But your golden hair is very beautiful. You don't need to dye your hair. Owen always says that no one has hair color prettier than yours."

"Really? I think your silver-purple hair is prettier." Speaking of hair, Mila remembered another question that she was curious about. "I heard from Owen that you're a descendant of the Leaves?"

Yin Qie Zi nodded.

"I heard that the Leaves are all very beautiful, is this true?"

"I don't know..." Yin Qie Zi said uncomfortably, "I'm only their descendent; I've never met them."

"Oh," said Mila. She then asked confusedly, "But your Leaf ancestors should still be here, right? Aren't the life spans of the Leaves very long? Ah... Your ancestor couldn't have left in the Leaf migration 20 years ago, could they?"

"Probably. I'm not so sure about the details; both of my parents are dead."

Mila blinked, then hastily said, "I'm very sorry..."

"It's okay." Yin Qie Zi shook his head.

"Mila."

Hearing the voice, both Mila and Yin Qie Zi turned around to look at the person. Mila immediately cried, "Father!"

The human that appeared was wearing a military uniform with a style similar to Owen's. However, it was black, and there were many gold and silver medals hanging on the front. His face had many wrinkles, and his hair was already in the grey-white vicissitudes of life. He looked as if he was over 50 years old. His stature was thin and his back was straight, so it wasn't difficult to guess that this person had surely once been a spirited young man.

West...?

Yin Qie Zi froze. Although he was someone whom Yin Qie Zi had not forgotten for the past 20 years, the other's face was so different from the one in his memories that it left him unable to react.

Mila tried to rotate her wheelchair to be next to her father, but the Warlord Paladin was faster. He had already walked to his daughter's side, and lowered his head to hear her speak.

Mila, for once, acted like a little daughter, and said somewhat flightily, "Father, you're so slow! I almost thought you weren't coming!"

A trace of a smile appeared on Warlord Paladin's serious face. He laughed and said, "Today's my two children's birthday, even the king's command couldn't have stopped me."

Mila said grinningly, "Father wouldn't really disobey the king's orders!"

"That may be difficult to say." While Paladin smiled and chatted with his daughter, he didn't fail to notice the head of silvery-purple hair beside her. Pausing, he asked, "Mila, who is this guest?"

Yin Qie Zi felt his heart skip a beat.

"It's brother's friend!" Mila replied happily, and then looked towards Yin Qie Zi.

In her knowledge, this would be the part where Yin Qie Zi introduced himself. However, Yin Qie Zi didn't respond. When Mila saw that her father was frowning, she immediately said, "Father, this is Yin Qie Zi, the spirit binder that created the summer orchid hair dye medicine."

"Oh, you mean him." When not facing his daughter, Warlord Paladin's expression immediately became much more serious. He nodded at Yin Qie Zi. "Your medicine made the queen very happy."

Paladin's voice wasn't very warm, but for the average person to obtain such praise from his mouth, a heavy price would need to be paid, so they would usually react ecstatically.

However, Yin Qie Zi only fell quiet for a moment, before replying faintly, "It's my honor."

Hearing Yin Qie Zi's indifferent response, Paladin wrinkled his brow. With his status, he wasn't used to being treated so indifferently.

Seeing Yin Qie Zi's cold attitude, Mila was first shocked, before beginning to worry secretly. She spied Owen and Edward carrying a pile of food towards them, and despite the fact that they were still a few dozen steps away, she hastily said, "Father, Prince Edward and Owen are here."

There was no way that Warlord Paladin hadn't seen through Mila's words. But as a doting parent, there was no way he would unveil her thoughts. Instead, he looked towards Edward and Owen's direction cooperatively.

Seeing that his father was looking at him, Owen jogged quickly up to him. A call of "Father" was just out of his mouth when he received a reprimand from Warlord Paladin. "You're 18 years old today yet you're still running around so carelessly. You're not acting like an adult at all! Look at His Highness Edward, and learn from him!"

Edward leisurely walked over, and said courteously, "Warlord Paladin, I wish you success in all your battles and wars."

Warlord Paladin nodded, and answered, "And I wish you victory too, Your Highness Edward."

Edward handed over a small pastry to Mila. Doing so in front of her own father was usually considered both insolent and inappropriate, but the prince knew that the military-born Paladin didn't care much about etiquette. Compared to manners, he'd rather that his daughter eat more, instead of being so thin that she looked as if she could be blown away by the wind.

Mila took the cake, and after discovering that it was her favorite gooseberry plum tower, she smiled at Edward and began eating it.

At this time, Owen also passed some food to Yin Qie Zi, but he wasn't as attentive as Edward. He didn't even know what the other liked to eat, and simply stuffed a plate of meat into Yin Qie Zi's hands.

Yin Qie Zi rolled his eyes at Owen. The opposite party had eaten with him many times, yet still didn't remember the fact that he didn't eat meat. He eyed the juicy, roasted pigeon on the plate, and suddenly felt sick. He immediately handed the plate back to Owen, who finally remembered that the other didn't eat meat, and smiled apologetically.

Paladin's serious expression relaxed when he saw his daughter eating. He looked around and said, "Most of the guests have already arrived, but why haven't I seen Commander Chris yet?"

Owen said awkwardly, "Teacher said that he's not coming and that he's not used to these social occasions..." He saw his father's face darken, and immediately added, "But Teacher has already given his gift to Mila, and he also gave me a sword."

Hearing this, Warlord Paladin's expression lightened, and directed his attention to the silent Yin Qie Zi. "What has this young man given you?"

Mila said smiling, "Yin Qie Zi said that I could ask him any question about spirit binding, and even when my birthday passes, I can still ask him anything!"

The crowd marveled at this. A spirit binder's most precious treasure was always their spirit binding techniques. As a spirit binder, Yin Qie Zi's present was equal to giving his everything to Mila.

Warlord Paladin nodded, satisfied.

At this time, the butler Yehv walked over, and reported respectfully to Paladin, "Master, the cake is ready. Would you like to host the cake cutting ceremony?"

Warlord Paladin looked at his daughter. Seeing that she had finished eating, he told Yehv, "It's rather late, so let's begin."

"Yes."

Yehv signaled the servant at the door, and then handed a glass cup and a silver fork to Warlord Paladin.

Warlord Paladin tapped on the glass to attract everyone's attention. He then walked towards the middle of the hall. Owen and Mila followed closely behind him.

Edward walked beside Yin Qie Zi. With his status, he should have been walking side by side with Warlord Paladin, but he knew that today's star wasn't him, so he willingly stayed behind. In order to not to raise any disputes, he even pretended that he hung back to talk with Yin Qie Zi.

Although it was pretend, Edward couldn't help but turn his head to look at Yin Qie Zi curiously. Owen's gossip partner wasn't only Mila, there was also him. So he was also someone who had also heard the name "Yin Qie Zi" for over a year. Now that he had finally seen the individual in person, how could he not be curious?

The person beside him had a head of silvery-purple hair. The first thing everyone always noticed was the silvery-purple hair, but Edward noted instead, that the other's eyes were a dark red color. He had thought it was black at first. Humans' eye colors were more varied than their hair colors: blue, green, brown, and naturally, black.

He had thought that Yin Qie Zi's eyes were an ordinary black, but looking from up close, he discovered that they were actually a dark red. Yin Qie Zi's hair color was very light in color, his skin was even paler, but his eyes were such a dark red that it looked kind of strange.

At this time, Yin Qie Zi turned to look at him. He wrinkled his brow slightly, as if he couldn't understand what Edward was looking at.

Edward smiled, and said, "Your skin's really white. I thought that Mila's skin was already as white as snow, but only after meeting you do I realize what snow white truly looks like."

"I don't get much sun," Yin Qie Zi said lightly.

"Owen also mentioned it. He said that you spend all day at home making medicine, and that he's never went to your house and found you away."

Hearing this, Yin Qie Zi said icily, "What else did he say about me?"

"Oh... That depends on how much he knows about you," Edward said smilingly, far too happy to get his best friend in trouble.

Yin Qie Zi scoffed.

Meanwhile, Warlord Paladin stopped in his tracks. Behind him stood his children, and in front of him was the cake that the servants had placed.

The servants handed him a large silver knife to cut the cake. Warlord Paladin took the knife, raised it high above his head, and then yelled loudly, "May the Goddess of Victory forever bless the kingdom of Zhan Yan."

Everyone in the room yelled after him, "May the Goddess of Victory forever bless the kingdom of Zhan Yan."

Warlord Paladin sliced the cake, and swiftly cut away a few pieces. According to tradition, the birthday star was always the first one to get a slice, and the cake was then distributed according to the social status of the guests.

After Warlord Paladin had cut off slices of the cake for the servants to put on plates, he took a plate, and looked in Owen's direction. The latter immediately stepped forward.

Warlord Paladin handed him the plate while smiling, "Owen, His Majesty and your teacher Chris have agreed to let you become a War-Glaive today."

Owen took the cake and knew exactly what he should say. Immediately, he said respectfully, "I give my thanks to His Majesty, to Father, and also to Teacher Chris. I'm only able to become a War-Glaive today because of your guidance."

After finishing, everyone clapped loudly with smiles on their faces. Now, Owen really was the kingdom's youngest War-Glaive.

Even so, everyone had already guessed what his present would be. What they were more curious about was the present Warlord Paladin was going to give to his beloved daughter Mila. Some people even wondered if it would be engagement papers. Going by Mila's age, she should already have a love interest in mind.

But much to everyone's surprise, Warlord Paladin didn't say what present he was giving to Mila. Instead, he just handed a slice of cake to her. He quickly cut another for Prince Edward, and then told the servants to cut and distribute the rest of the cake.

Finally, Warlord Paladin put his hands, one each, on Owen and Mila's shoulders. The commander who had led armies said with rare emotion in his voice, "Owen, Mila, you two are my pride and joy."

Hearing those words, Owen and Mila both smiled. But Yin Qie Zi, who was standing nearby, looked as though he had been hit hard. His originally pale face was now far paler and bloodless.

"Mr. Yin Qie Zi, are you all right?"

Yin Qie Zi turned around, Yehv was looking at him worriedly. He tried to smile, but couldn't manage it no matter how hard he tried. He said with a strained voice, "I don't feel well."

Yehv looked at Yin Qie Zi's face, and immediately cried, "Your face is very pale! Please come with me, I'll take you immediately to the doctor..."

Yin Qie shook his head. "It's fine. It's an old problem. I just need some rest."

"Is that so?" Yehv was still very concerned, "Then I'll prepare a guest room for you immediately. If you truly don't feel well, please don't try to hide it, and come tell me right away."

Faced with Yehv's concern, Yin Qie Zi nodded his head calmly.

"Please come with me."

Yin Qie Zi followed quietly behind Yehv all the way out of the great hall. While he was leaving he turned around, and happened to see Owen glancing at him worriedly. He shook his head at Owen to indicate everything was fine, and continued with Yehv to the guest room.

Yehv opened the guest room's door, and said respectfully, "Please wait here a moment, I'll send a maid around to attend to you."

"No, it's all right." Yin Qie refused. "I'm not a noble. I don't need any one to serve me!"

"Then... Please allow me to check on you after an hour, okay?" Seeing Yin Qie Zi frown, Yehv added hastily, "I'll only come once. Once I'm sure you're fine, or if you're asleep by then, I won't disturb you."

Yin Qie Zi was silent for a moment, but then nodded his assent.

"Then please rest well."

After saying this, Yehv bowed, and slowly exited the room, closing the door behind him.

Owen... Mila...

After the door was closed, Yin Qie Zi slowly knelt down, and buried his face in his hands.

He would have never have guessed, that even after so many years, he would still feel his heart twist whenever he heard those two names. Back there in the hall, he had to grit his teeth to keep himself from... keep himself from grabbing the dagger on his waist and letting his hatred explode in West's face!

"West..." *No!* Yehv might still be outside the door.

With that thought, he managed to calm his writhing emotions enough to keep quiet. His restraint made his chest hurt.

After waiting and thinking that Yehv had left, Yin Qie Zi couldn't help but shout quietly, "Zhan · West · Paladin! You don't have the right to speak Owen and Mila's names! Who gave you the right to call your children by these two names... I won't allow it!"

West, I'll make you pay the price. You took Owen from me... you took everything from me!

Yin Qie Zi clenched his fists so tight that his nails dug into his flesh. His dark red blood oozed out and stained the white gloves...After a while, he finally noticed, and hastily took them off. But the elegant white gloves were already ripped and dyed red, no longer usable.

He still needed to return the clothes to Owen!

Yin Qie Zi sighed, took his gloves off, and looked around. The guest room was arranged quite elegantly. The color theme was light purple, and many of the decorations were silver. Purple and silver... clearly this wasn't a coincidence, maybe this guest room was specially prepared for him?

Maybe Owen had already decided to invite him to stay for a few days after the banquet. He didn't know what Owen planned to do, but this suited his wishes. He had spent a lot of time thinking of a way to get into Warlord Paladin's mansion.

He just didn't think it would be that hard... He had spent a whole year before finally receiving an invitation to come in the Warlord's house legally.

Actually, getting Owen's trust wasn't hard; it was his father who was far too careful with things. Strangers couldn't even think of coming close to his family, especially when trying to get close to the defenseless Mila. That was even harder than getting near the king!

But it was entirely his fault.

Back then, he had been far too hasty, too eager to get revenge that it caused him to fail. The result of his failure back then had caused West to become wary. Since then he hadn't found a single opportunity... However, even the most meticulous person would become lax after a long time.

Twenty years had passed since then. This period of time may seem long to humans, but to him, the wait was short.

The mistake back then made him wait for a full twenty years. It taught him to not be hasty, but to go slowly. Before long, he'd make West just like him...

Empty-handed!

It was only when Owen stumbled into the room that Yin Qie Zi returned from his thoughts. He looked at Owen with a frown.

Owen rushed forward and grabbed his shoulders. "Yin Qie Zi, are you all right? I knocked for a long time but you never answered. I almost thought you fell over dead...You really scared me!"

"Who fell over dead?" Yin Qie Zi snapped, and then remembered he used "not feeling well" as an excuse to leave early. He immediately added, "It's fine, just an old problem."

But Owen frowned and said, "Fine? You're even paler than usual. If you were lying on the bed, I would definitely think you were dead."

"I'm fine, don't randomly curse me!"

Yin Qie Zi retorted angrily, but upon seeing Owen's stunned expression, he realized that his emotions were too out of control.

He suddenly said "Owen" and took out a small bag, and threw it to the other. "Your birthday present."

Owen fumbled with the bag, and opened it. Inside were three thumb-sized bottles, two white and one red.

"Drink one bottle per month, but save the red bottle for last. Using these will make your physique better, but not by a lot. You'll probably just run faster, jump higher, and be a bit stronger."

"That's 'not a lot?'" Owen widened his eyes, and cried, "There is really such medicine? How come I didn't know about it?"

"Don't expect me to make more for you. I've only just made this one set." Yin Qie Zi rushed to explain. "Some really rare spirits are required to make this, and the success rate is also really low. Litelli helped me look for materials for half a year, but I only managed to make this one set of spirit medicines. It'll probably be even harder to find the materials now, so I can't guarantee that I'll have more to give you."

Hearing this, Owen looked disappointed, and mumbled, "A spirit medicine that even you can't give out... This must truly be hard to make. Other spirit binders probably can't even make it."

After mumbling this, he scratched his head, "I originally thought that your presence at the banquet was your birthday present to me... in short, thanks."

"You're welcome."

Really... you're welcome.

Yin Qie Zi glanced at the red bottle, and then said promptly, "I'm sleeping."

Owen said hastily, "Let's eat breakfast tomorrow, okay?"

"As long as you don't forget that I don't eat meat, and put another pile of meat on my plate again!"

"Ah, hahaha..."

Chapter Eight

False Arrangement, Real Assassin...Who?

Litelli once asked me why I was so focused on the past.

Even if I got revenge, it wouldn't change anything. What was lost was already lost and would never come back.

I answered him, revenge wouldn't make the lost come back, but aside from remembering my hatred, I had no other way of stopping the memories from fading, disappearing.

But the one thing I didn't say was that, since I had already taken so many lives, the only way to repent would be to make my own life a tragedy.

—Gong Hua

Even though Owen had invited him to have breakfast together, when Yin Qie Zi walked into the dining hall, only Mila was inside.

He wasn't surprised though; truthfully, the sky wasn't even bright yet. If the servants hadn't told him that Mila was already in the dining hall, he would have decided to come a bit later.

"You're really early." Once she saw that Yin Qie Zi had entered the dining hall, Mila put down the book in her hand and smilingly said, "I thought I'd have to wait another hour for breakfast! Owen would only be here in another hour or so."

Yin Qie Zi replied simply, "I have a habit of waking up early."

"Most people are used to waking up early, but I've never met someone who wakes up this early before." Mila smiled and then asked, "What would you like to eat?"

Yin Qie Zi said, as always, "I don't eat meat."

"I've heard from Yehv. Then, is there something you especially want to eat?"

Yin Qie Zi thought about it and said in a strained voice, "I like drinking soup."

Mila smiled. "I've also heard about that from Yehv."

"Why is it Yehv? I've barely spoken with him." He couldn't understand. Shouldn't she have heard it from Owen?

Mila said with a laugh, "Because Owen tells everything to Yehv and then forgets about it all. So it's better to ask Yehv about things than Owen!"

Yin Qie Zi said coldly, "If Owen didn't have Yehv, he probably wouldn't even remember how to get home!"

Mila laughed, "You, you're really just as Owen said; your speech is completely merciless!"

Yin Qie Zi was speechless. It seemed as if he really couldn't treat Mila as someone he'd only just met. She probably knew him better than the forgetful Owen.

At this time, Mila turned her head and told the young maid behind her, "Fenny, let's serve the meals according to what we've already decided on!"

"Yes, miss." After receiving the order, Fenny promptly got to work. She first arranged the utensils, and then instructed the other servants to start preparing the meals.

"Fenny?" Yin Qie Zi glanced at the maid and asked, "Yehv's wife?"

Mila nodded. She waited for a shocked reaction from Yin Qie Zi since Yehv and Fenny were a full 15 years apart. Almost everyone who had seen Fenny for the first time had felt very surprised.

However, Yin Qie Zi didn't ask anything, nor did he look shocked.

Mila thought about it and realized, "Owen already told you?"

"Told me what?"

"Owen told you Fenny's age before, right?"

"He never told me." Yin Qie Zi frowned, unable to comprehend why Mila had suddenly mentioned Fenny's age. To him, Fenny looked around the same age as Mila, at most a few years older, so what was there to be so surprised about?

"You're not surprised?" Now it was Mila's turn to be surprised.

Yin Qie Zi asked uncertainly, "Surprised about what?"

Mila reminded him, "Yehv and Fenny are 15 years apart in age."

Yin Qie Zi paused, then said hastily, "That's not something to feel strange about!"

It should be okay like this, right? Yin Qie Zi felt kind of uneasy. He had learnt that sentence from someone else; if he made a mistake or said something wrong, he only needed to add that one sentence to dispel the other's suspicions.

"That's right." As predicted, Mila smiled and said, "It's not that strange."

Meanwhile, servants entered the room pushing a cart filled with food. The cart stopped beside Fenny. She looked at it for a while before squeezing some lemons and dripping the juice onto the food. She then placed the plates in front of Mila and Yin Qie Zi.

Yin Qie Zi looked at the food on his plate questioningly. There were many transparent cubes in the middle of the plate and a large, fat leaf beside it as decoration. He had never seen anything like it before.

"This is called 'fruit-leaf,' and apparently it's the Leaves' staple food," Mila explained patiently. "The leaf beside it is what it used to look like. The semi-transparent cubes in the middle are what the fruit-leaf looks like after removing the outer skin and cutting it up. It tastes really good if you drizzle some lemon juice and honey on it!"

The Leaves' staple food? Yin Qie Zi looked at the food on his plate dazedly.

"I once asked Fenny to make it into soup, but no matter how we cooked it, it wasn't as delicious as cutting it up and eating it raw, so we gave up. The soup is just ordinary potato soup with milk."

Was this specially prepared for me? Yin Qie Zi raised his head and looked at Mila. "Even if I'm a descendant of the Leaves, you don't need to go out of your way to give me the Leaves' food. I'm not really familiar with the Leaves, so I have no idea what they usually eat."

"Hehe, it's not specially prepared. To tell the truth, I've always been interested in the Leaves, and I've always been researching them. So I asked someone to look for the fruit-leaf out of curiosity. This isn't the first time I've had fruit-leaf, and I actually really like this type of food; I have it for a meal once almost every two or three days."

Yin Qie Zi nodded.

Speaking about the Leaves, Mila suddenly became high-spirited. She said excitedly, "Did you know? Apart from the Spirit Tree, the Leaves also have another guardian spirit called Hua¹⁸!"

"... I didn't know."

Hearing Yin Qie Zi's response, Mila said somewhat disappointedly, "So you don't know? I'm really curious about what Huas look like! Even though there are records on them, none of them bring up Huas' appearance."

Yin Qie Zi said faintly, "Maybe it's because there's nothing mentionable about Huas' appearance."

"Why wouldn't there be anything mentionable?" Mila asked fervently. "Aren't you curious? About why they would be called Huas? Are they like the Spirit Tree, and do they actually have the appearance of a flower? But the records say they have the ability to attack! If flowers went and attacked their enemies themselves, wouldn't that be weird?"

A flower attacking enemies... Yin Qie Zi imagined it and couldn't help but laugh and admit, "It is quite weird."

"See?" Mila said, smiling. She took another piece of fruit-leaf.

Seeing her, Yin Qie Zi also ate a piece and found that the fruit-leaf was very juicy and fresh. With the sweet smell of honey and the slightly sour tang of lemon, it was very refreshing to eat.

"Is it good?" Mila asked curiously.

Yin Qie Zi said earnestly, "Very delicious."

"That's great." Mila smiled happily. "If you would like another helping, just ask Fenny."

The fruit-leaf was only an appetizer; the main course was mashed potatoes, boiled vegetables, and grains. Yin Qie Zi, however, barely touched any of it and only asked Fenny for

¹⁸ "Hua" means flower in Chinese

some more fruit-leaf. Finally, under the gaze of a smiling Mila, Yin Qie Zi realized he should have some of the main course out of politeness, but he only just managed to eat some grains.

After finishing the main course, Owen finally arrived belatedly, though it was just barely past sunrise. Yehv also followed after Owen.

"It's a shame you two aren't spiritmancers."

Seeing the two seated at the table, Owen said somewhat despondently, "During training, Teacher Chris would always ask me to get up at sunrise to practice. And now, you guys wake up before sunrise even without someone asking you. You're even more hard-working than spiritmancers in training!"

Yehv walked towards the food-cart, looked at the food, and then turned and asked, "Young Master, would you like some fruit-leaf as an appetizer?"

"No thanks!" Owen refused. "I dislike that kind of tasteless food."

After finishing his sentence, he received an eye roll from Yin Qie Zi and also saw Mila ducking her head and laughing. He couldn't help but feel a bit bewildered.

At this time, Yehv asked, "Then, how about some bacon rolls as an appetizer?"

"Sure, you can make some for me."

"Yes."

Yehv served him some bacon rolls, and after Owen had finished a few, he saw that Yin Qie Zi's plate was heaped with uneaten food. He hastily asked, "Yin Qie Zi, are you not used to the food? You can tell Fenny and Yehv what you want to eat."

Yin Qie Zi said, annoyed, "The food is fine, especially the fruit-leaf. It's really delicious."

Owen finally realized what he had said wrong. "Right, right. It's definitely really delicious! My sister also likes eating it."

Yin Qie Zi's response was an exaggerated eye roll, accompanied by Mila's bell-like laughter.

Owen rubbed his nose and mumbled, "But it's true that it's tasteless... bacon's much more fragrant."

"You can have your bacon! Brother. We're all done eating; you should hurry up," Mila said with a smile. She then turned to Yin Qie Zi: "So, Yin Qie Zi, do you have anything planned later?"

Yin Qie Zi shook his head. "If I had anything planned, I wouldn't have stayed the night."

"You're right." Mila smiled. "Then could you accompany me on a stroll along the streets today, please?"

Hearing this invitation, Yin Qie Zi was quite surprised. From what he had heard, Mila never went outside. If it wasn't for that, he wouldn't have hesitated so long for an opportunity. He also wouldn't have needed to spend a year befriending Owen in order to use his friendship as a reason to get into the Warlord's mansion.

He couldn't help but remind her, "The streets aren't safe. You might encounter danger."

"Owen will come with us... along with some soldiers." Mila's tone was very indifferent. It was evident that she wasn't happy that there would be a company of soldiers following them.

"Come on!" Owen urged. "It's rare that my sister is interested, so don't disappoint her!"

So we're really going shopping? Yin Qie Zi glanced at Owen doubtfully; the latter's smile was so annoyingly bright that it made one want to punch him.

"Yin Qie Zi..."

Yin Qie Zi's attention was drawn to Mila's voice. Looking behind him, he saw that Mila had her hands clasped together and her head slightly lowered like a little girl. She said flightily, "Could you accompany me? Please?"

Had he landed himself in some weird situation?

Seeing Mila's spoiled attitude, Yin Qie Zi couldn't help but wonder.

Finally, Yin Qie Zi complied and pushed Mila's wheelchair onto the streets, though he was constantly signaling Owen, trying to tell him to come and push the wheelchair instead. Even if he had lived a sheltered life, he understood how weird and inappropriate it was for him to be the one pushing Mila's wheelchair.

However, even though he signaled Owen, Fenny, and even Yehv, no one reacted or came to ask what was wrong. It was as if everyone was especially slow today.

This surprised Yin Qie Zi. He had always thought that Yehv's observational skills were inhuman. Sometimes, Owen would only have to glance at something for Yehv to go and buy it.

Also, Yehv had never made any mistakes.

"Yin Qie Zi, am I heavy?" Mila asked worriedly.

Yin Qie Zi glanced down at her and replied earnestly, "You're very light."

She didn't feel reassured. "But you don't look very well. Isn't it because I'm too heavy, so you're tired from pushing me?"

Yin Qie Zi shook his head. "No, it's because everyone's looking at us."

"You're right!" Mila gasped and then realized. "It must be because your silvery-purple hair is so unique!"

He felt that the two rows of soldiers were far more conspicuous than his silvery-purple hair. Yin Qie Zi thought this silently.

"Truthfully, I don't go out often." Mila smiled faintly. "So how should we go shopping? Where do people usually like to shop around?"

For some reason, everyone was looking at Yin Qie Zi. Slightly confused, the latter said hastily, "I don't go out often either, so I have no idea!"

"You can't be making spirit medicine every day, right?" Mila said humorously. "Are you this serious about it because your teacher was really strict?"

"It's just my habit, that's all." Yin Qie Zi calmly changed the topic and avoided the subject of teachers completely.

“Why don’t we go to the grocery street the next street over?” Fenny suggested. “There are lots of cute things there! And there are also things that men would be interested in!”

Seeing that the atmosphere was kind of awkward, Owen said immediately, “Let’s just go there!”

After arriving at the grocery street, Mila was at a loss at first. However, after Fanny took her from booth to booth, the unusual trinkets immediately captured her attention. They began chatting nonstop about hair accessories, jewelry, and stitching tools.

The two girls weren’t the only ones who were extremely excited—even Owen was as well. He would readily pick up leather wrist bands, sword sheaths, sword cloths... He would also occasionally pick up a bunch of spirit medicine to ask Yin Qie Zi about.

Yin Qie Zi and Yehv were the only two uninterested people. Even though Yin Qie Zi didn’t go shopping often, he still occasionally came here for necessities, so he wasn’t a stranger to this street.

Yin Qie Zi wondered, “I don’t know why Owen is so interested in this place. Doesn’t he change wrist bands often?”

Yehv smiled and answered, “Young Master’s things are mostly bought by others. Even if he could choose, it would mainly be from the three to five styles brought to him. This is the first time the Young Master has seen so many things in person.”

Yin Qie Zi nodded. He could roughly understand why Owen and Mila couldn’t come to this kind of place frequently; the two rows of soldiers were truly a bit too conspicuous and caused the vendors and other customers much inconvenience. Probably because everyone rarely saw this kind of situation, though, they allowed it... At the same time, they could be curious onlookers.

It was amazing how Mila and Owen could remain so at ease in the current situation. Yin Qie Zi felt as if every part of him was squirming with discomfort; he wasn’t used to being stared at by so many people.

Yin Qie Zi sighed and began looking at the items so he wouldn’t appear even more conspicuous by standing there blankly.

He looked around casually. Suddenly, a round hairclip caught his attention. He picked it up to examine it closely.

The hairclip was made of jade and was carved into the shape of a flower. Unlike normal flowers, however, this flower was black, and upon a closer look, the workmanship was very meticulous. The flower petals were extremely lifelike, but because the hairclip was black, people wouldn’t notice that it was a flower if they glanced at it carelessly. They would just see a round lump of black.

The vendor, seeing that a customer had come, immediately started calling out loudly, “That is a defective product! The artisan probably used the wrong material! He actually made

the flower into a black one, really! If you want it, then I'll sell it to you for a discount: one silver coin. How about it?"

Yin Qie Zi glared at the vendor, took out a handful of gold coins, and threw them onto the table. He said coldly, "I'll buy it."

The vendor stared the pile of gold coins dumbly, unable to react.

Yin Qie Zi scoffed and turned to leave, but once he had turned around, he regretted his foolish move. Owen and the others were currently looking at him with expressions of surprise.

He hastily went over to push the wheelchair and offhandedly passed the hairclip to Mila. He said hurriedly, "It's for you."

Mila took the hairclip with surprise and then began to scrutinize the hairclip carefully.

Meanwhile, Owen jogged over to Yin Qie Zi and said disbelievingly, "The vendor said it was only worth one silver coin, so why did you throw out a pile of gold coins for no reason? It's just a defective hairclip. Even if you're rich, you shouldn't waste money like this, right?"

Yin Qie Zi suddenly growled, "It's not defective!"

Upon seeing Owen's shocked expression, Yin Qie Zi immediately realized he was behaving strangely, but he had no way to explain to the other why he was so out of control.

Should he make up a justification? But what kind of lie would he have to weave in order to explain why he had lost control of his emotions over a hairclip? He didn't know what to do...

"I'm going home. It's not far from my house here." After finishing his sentence, he turned around to leave without waiting for anyone's reply.

"Yin Qie Zi, wait!" Owen immediately called out.

Yin Qie Zi stopped in his tracks and remembered that, since he had spent so much time getting this opportunity to enter the Warlord mansion, he couldn't just give up. He turned around, intending to apologize to Owen. He told himself that even if he didn't explain anything, Owen wouldn't pester him too much in this situation, right?

When he turned around, however, what he saw was a shadow behind Owen raising an arm, a glint of silver in the shadow's hand. He yelled a warning—"Owen, behind you"—and charged forward.

Owen stopped, turned around, and found himself face to face with a silver flash. He hastily stepped back and just barely avoided it, but behind him was another assassin raising his sword...

Yin Qie Zi dived forward and pulled out the short knife at his waist. As he blocked the assassin's sword, his knife slid against the sword's blade and towards the other's throat.

The assassin hesitated, immediately gave up attacking, and backed up a couple of steps, but Yin Qie Zi's knife was still glued to his sword. The knife slid towards where the blade and the hilt connected, and as the knife sliced downwards, he undid the chain. A perfectly cut sword blade fell onto the ground. Only a sword hilt was left in the assassin's hand.

The assassin promptly threw away the hilt and then ran away without looking back.

Watching the assassin leave, Yin Qie Zi chased after him for a few steps but then stopped. He felt that something was very wrong...

Owen ran towards him and shouted disbelievingly, "Yin Qie Zi, you know how to use a sword? The way you broke the opponent's sword... What accurate chain undoing! You're a spiritmancer? How come you never told me before?"

"There are a lot of things I haven't told you!"

Yin Qie Zi grabbed Owen's collar and said icily, "You better explain this to me: what are you really trying to do? You were attacked, but Yehv and the soldiers didn't do anything. Even the assassins weren't truly trying to hurt you. So don't tell me you don't know anything about it!"

Owen's expression froze for a moment. He then smiled bitterly and replied truthfully, "I knew about it. My father wanted to test you; he felt that you weren't a weak spirit binder."

Yin Qie Zi's heart skipped a beat, but he tried to use anger to conceal it. He then growled, "I might be a spirit binder, but I'm not weak! You know that I wandered the wilderness for a while. Do you think that's something a weak spirit binder can do? There are plenty of things I haven't told you, but it doesn't mean I'm trying to hide something. It's just because I don't want to talk about it and there's no point in telling you!"

After he had finished yelling, Yin Qie Zi turned around to leave. It looked as if he was leaving in anger, but only he knew that he was actually more flustered than angry. He had thought that he acquired Warlord Paladin's trust and therefore could enter the Warlord mansion. He had no idea that the other still suspected him.

Fortunately, he hadn't gone to inspect the mansion last night; who knew how many people were secretly monitoring him?

"Yin Qie Zi!"

It was Mila's voice. The man in question stopped in his tracks, turned around, and saw Mila trying her best to roll her wheelchair towards him.

"Thank you for the hairclip you gave me. The flower on it is really beautifully carved!"

He froze.

Mila held the hairclip, smiled, and said, "If it wasn't for your good vision, I would have missed this beautiful hairclip completely."

He didn't know how to reply. "It's only a cheap trinket...I'm glad you like it."

"Will you come eat fruit-leaf with me next time?" Mila spread her hands helplessly. "You know, Owen doesn't like to eat fruit-leaf, and he also doesn't get up very early!"

Yin Qie Zi stayed silent for a while, and then at last he nodded.

Upon seeing the other's nod, Owen finally dared to step forward and apologize with his head lowered. "I'm sorry. My father's very untrusting, I'm sure you know that. I wouldn't say no to him, and even if I did, it would be futile; he would probably find someone on his own to test you."

Hearing this, Yin Qie Zi didn't say anything, but neither did he continue to look angry.

"This expression is..." Owen examined the other's expression and then said grinningly, "You forgive me?"

Yin Qie Zi said snappily, "I still haven't cooled down yet, so don't act all giddy around me!"

"Sure!" Owen rearranged his smile a bit and asked, "So you aren't leaving?"

Yin Qie Zi remained silent for a while, and then said, "No, I'm still going to go back. I'll come find you guys another day."

"So that's it? I wanted to spar with you... but all right!" Owen was a bit disappointed, but he still nodded.

A rare opportunity had slipped away, just like that.

Yin Qie Zi had no choice, however, because too much had happened... it had only been two days, but he felt as if those two days had been longer than twenty years. All sorts of confusing emotions were roiling about in his chest, welling up so much that he couldn't breathe. He needed some rest.

"I'll be going."

After saying this, Yin Qie Zi waved goodbye to Mila and then truly turned to leave.

When he neared the street corner, he suddenly heard a sharp sound. Looking behind him, he saw that a place a few steps back was covered with broken glass. A man dressed as an assassin and wearing a mask was standing there.

Even though the other was dressed as an assassin, his appearance was too conspicuous. Yin Qie Zi couldn't believe that this assassin had really come to kill someone.

He looked at Owen suspiciously and asked, "Owen, what are you up to now..."

He then stopped abruptly when he saw the assassin throw a knife towards Mila.

The person's target was Mila? This definitely wasn't planned. Warlord Paladin wouldn't let there be any possibility of his daughter getting injured!

"Mila!"

Owen turned around with a yell, but Yin Qie Zi didn't go over to help. He was too far away; there was no way he could make it.

There was the sound of a strike. Fenny was holding a sword in her hand, and the assassin's knife was stuck in the ground.

Seeing this, Yin Qie Zi was glad he hadn't acted rashly last night. Fenny was actually another of Mila's bodyguards! Then Yehv, too, was probably a hidden ace.

Fenny held the sword and stood in front of Mila. Yehv stood between Fenny and Owen, but he wasn't carrying any weapons; he just stood there with a stereotypical butler smile.

Owen looked furious and pulled out his sword. The assassin took out a small bottle and threw it on the ground. The bottle broke, releasing a large amount of white smoke.

Yin Qie Zi wasn't nervous. He was very familiar with the type of spirit medicine the assassin had used. He also sold this kind of medicine often. The main buyers were usually mysterious clients.

This spirit medicine had to be separated into two bottles, and when used, the two bottles of medicine had to be mixed together. The effect was the appearance of a large quantity of white smoke. The white smoke wasn't toxic, and to most people the medicine was useless, but to people who needed to escape or create confusion, this medicine was a necessity. It was even more important than healing medicine.

Yin Qie Zi hesitated, unsure of whether he should go help Owen. He quickly abandoned the thought though. Enemies and allies were hard to distinguish in the white smoke, so joining in would just make it harder for Owen and the others to distinguish friend from foe.

Besides, he really didn't think the assassin would succeed. He knew how hard it was to harm Owen and Mila.

Suddenly, a black shadow appeared from within the white smoke... Yin Qie Zi pulled out his knife immediately but still barely blocked the attack. He had no idea the assassin would attack him. He had thought the target was Mila or Owen, but he was clearly wrong. The assassin's target was actually him!

The opponent's weapon was a dagger. Knives and daggers were both weapons of speed, but because the opponent was so fast, it would be almost impossible to use chain breaking to damage the other's weapon. The two could only use pure force in their fight. Dagger and knife clashed repeatedly in the air, making an almost musical series of clangs.

Yin Qie Zi quickly discovered that the other was very strong; the attacks could even be described as a furious storm.

His strongest offensive skill was following the enemy's attack, finding a weakness, and then striking to kill. Faced with this torrent of attacks, however, not only was finding a weakness impossible, he also had no time to strike back.

The attacks couldn't last long, though. If he could endure for long enough, the other would definitely slow down. This type of attack definitely couldn't last for long! Right now, however, Yin Qie Zi could only grind his teeth and brace himself.

Not long afterwards, the opponent suddenly used force to flick away both of their weapons. The assassin backed up a few steps and stopped attacking.

Yin Qie Zi hesitated but didn't go forward. When facing this kind of opponent, direct attacks were completely useless.

"Hi, it's been a long time."

Assassins usually needed to hide their real identities. However, this one actually opened his mouth and greeted him. Yin Qie Zi was left unable to react. He needed to be on guard to make sure that this wasn't a way for the other to distract him and sneak in an attack.

Seeing his dilemma, the assassin smiled and said teasingly, "How cold! It's been so long since we last met. Don't you miss me? My baby Gong Hua."

Yin Qie Zi was startled for a moment; his hesitation gave the other an opportunity. The assassin stepped forward and stabbed the dagger into Yin Qie Zi's left shoulder.

At this moment, there was only ten centimeters of distance between their faces. Even though the other was wearing a mask, his eyes weren't covered. Yin Qie Zi was able to see a scar on the assassin's face that sliced over the left eye diagonally. The wound wasn't deep, so he wasn't blind in the left eye.

That's great...

When the assassin pulled the dagger out, a large amount of blood sprayed out, splattering onto his face. The assassin didn't seem to mind though—he even stuck out his tongue and licked the blood on his face.

Maybe it was due to the other's actions or the sudden blood loss, but Yin Qie Zi felt dizzy and sat onto the ground. The knife was still in his hand as he glanced up at the assassin; he wasn't planning on giving up his life here.

Seeing this, the assassin gave an unexpected appraising smile. He said while smiling, "I knew you wouldn't die that easily. I'll come back to find you, remember this..."

He bent down and said gently, as if speaking to a lover, "I will never leave you."

Yin Qie Zi's pupils constricted abruptly.

At this time, Owen's call came: "Yin Qie Zi! Yin Qie Zi, where are you? Answer me!"

Hearing the calls, the assassin smiled and said in a low, husky voice, "Believe me. That name doesn't suit you."

Then he turned and disappeared into the smoke. Soon after, another person appeared from the fog. It was Owen.

"Yin Qie Zi... Shit! You lost a lot of blood!"

Owen panicked upon seeing that the other had been injured so gravely. He hastily picked up Yin Qie Zi and said, "Hang in there! I'll take you immediately to the doctor... Yin Qie Zi, how are you feeling?"

His reply was the sharp sound of his knife falling to the ground and a faint, almost unnoticeable utterance.

"I can't breathe..."

Chapter Nine

Returning to One's Original Identity-Flower

When I was still a confused and ignorant Flower, I could count the number of smiles people gave me on one hand.

Whenever anyone smiled at me, I would feel immense joy.

Even after my hands became dyed red with blood, people would still smile at me.

But whenever I saw those smiles, I would only feel pain.

The people who had smiled at me, did you know you were smiling at a death god?

—Gong Hua

I will never leave you...

Yin Qie Zi's eyes flew open, but the assassin with the injured left eye was already gone. He wanted to sit up, but the action pulled at his wound. He felt a wave of searing pain from his left shoulder; his wound had torn open again.

After enduring the pain for a moment, he sat up with some difficulty. When he saw his appearance, he took a sudden gasp of breath. He felt like his heart was seized in an icy grip... someone had already changed his clothes.

Did they know?

During his moment of panic, the door opened and Fenny came in holding a candle. When she saw Yin Qie Zi awake, she went around the room lighting up the candles. She then smiled at him and said, "I'll pour you a glass of water."

Yin Qie Zi felt thirsty and gladly took the glass Fenny offered him. After he drained the glass, he handed it back to Fenny. He then asked, with slight desperation in his voice, "Does everyone know?"

"Miss Mila, Young Master Owen, Yehv, and I know." Fenny's reply was very concise, but then she went on to explain. "When Yehv was examining your wounds, he felt something was wrong. He immediately covered you up. After reporting to Young Master, he brought you to this room. After that, only I helped you change your clothes. No one else saw you naked."

Even though he heard what Fenny said, Yin Qie Zi felt everything was hopeless. He buried his head between his knees and quietly said, "Get out."

Fenny hesitated for a moment, but then replied, "Yes."

Yin Qie Zi's heart was chaotic. What was he going to do now? Should he make up a reason and lie his way through? But West might have already told his son and daughter things about him. Did that mean he had to give up on his revenge...?

"Yin Qie Zi!" Owen shoved the door open.

He raised his head to look at Owen. Yin Qie Zi was immediately reminded of the fact that he had waited 20 years for his revenge. If he didn't act now, all his efforts would've been for naught... Perhaps he could change it to assassinating Owen?

Just when the thought formed in his head, Yehv and Fenny followed Owen into the room. He was injured, Owen wasn't a weakling, and now there was also Yehv and Fenny. It was obvious he had no chance of winning!

What to do? What *could* he do?

"Don't, don't cry Yin Qie Zi. What does a grown man like you... Oh!"

Owen was flustered. He had originally wanted to say "What does a grown man have to cry about," but he wasn't even sure if the other was a man. Owen was at a loss for words. He had no clue what to say.

Finally, Owen managed to force out a sentence, "Yin Qie Zi, don't worry. We would never tell your secret to other people."

"Don't talk about it!"

Hearing Owen's words, Yin Qie Zi grasped onto the thread of hope and turned to face Owen. "You're not allowed to tell anyone, inclu-cluding your father... and Prince Edward. They're not allowed to know!"

Owen had never seen Yin Qie Zi act this frenzied. In his mind, Yin Qie Zi was always the definition of calm and mysterious. He could only continue to promise the other, "All right, I won't tell them. No one will tell them."

After hearing that, Yin Qie Zi finally stopped panicking and incredulously asked, "Really?"

"Really." Owen scratched his face and honestly said, "In truth, Mila had already warned us that we couldn't tell anyone else."

Mila? Yin Qie Zi was taken aback; he couldn't help but feel grateful to Mila's attentiveness. But just when he was feeling grateful, he thought that if Mila was protecting his secret... she could also end up ruining her own life.

How ironic.

"But can you tell me exactly why your body is like this?" Owen couldn't resist asking.

Yin Qie Zi was silent, but there was no point to hiding it anymore. He openly admitted, "I'm not human."

Owen suddenly remembered that Yin Qie Zi had Leaf ancestry, and exclaimed, "Then you're a Leaf?"

Yehv opened his mouth at this moment to explain, "Young Master, I don't think that's the case. The Leaves have the same body anatomy as humans."

"Oh!" Owen realized his mistake and stopped recklessly guessing. Instead, he watched Yin Qie Zi. Although he didn't want to pressure the other into answering, he couldn't stifle his own curiosity.

Yin Qie Zi took in several deep breaths, and finally opened his mouth. "Owen, has Mila ever told you anything about the 'Flower?'"

"Flower?" Owen was struck dumb, but then he remembered. "You mean the Leaf Tribe's guardian spirit... Ah! It couldn't be?"

Owen stared disbelievingly at Yin Qie Zi, the latter nodded his head reluctantly to affirm the other's suspicions.

"I'm a Flower... A Flower that has been abandoned by the Leaf Tribe."

After hearing those words, Owen became even more curious and wanted to know everything. However, Yin Qie Zi said they had to wait for Mila to come before he would explain, because he didn't want to explain twice. So Owen could only wait obediently until Mila had woken up and finished dressing before he asked Fenny to go pick her up.

Owen was very impatient to listen to Yin Qie Zi's explanation, but when Mila came into the room, the first thing she said was, "Brother, let's eat breakfast first! Yin Qie Zi is heavily injured. We should let him replenish his energy."

Owen stared for a moment, but quickly replied, "You're right! Yehv, quickly, go prepare breakfast. We can eat in the room!"

"Yes."

Yin Qie Zi shook his head. "You guys can eat. I'll just have some fruit-leaf."

Mila immediately opposed his decision, "No, that's not enough! You need to replenish your energy—"

"I only need water," Yin Qie Zi cut in, "Other types of food will only cause me more trouble."

Mila, surprised, asked puzzledly, "I don't understand what you mean."

Owen quickly explained, "Mila, Yin Qie Zi said he's a Flower."

"Flower?" Mila revealed a confused expression, but then remembered what a Flower was. Alarmed, she blurted out, "You're the Leaf Tribe's guardian spirit?"

Yin Qie Zi nodded his head. "I'm a Flower. In reality, I don't even need to eat anything. I only need water. The fruit-leaf has a lot of water and it's also very fresh."

Mila was silent upon hearing Yin Qie Zi's words. She then ordered, "Fenny, prepare a lot of fruit-leaves. Also, bring two jars of spirit medicine."

"Yes."

At this moment, Yin Qie Zi quietly said, "You don't need to bring the spirit medicine. It has no effect on me. But my recovery speed is very fast, though not as fast as drinking spirit medicine."

"So there are tradeoffs," Owen muttered.

After that, Yehv and Fenny brought the food to the room. As everyone else was eating breakfast, Yin Qie Zi quickly ate some pieces of fruit-leaf. He then turned away from everyone and loosened the bandage on his shoulder. He examined his wound; it was as long as his pinkie, but it wasn't very wide. The wound was already starting to close up.

Yehv's voice came from behind him, "The weapon that hurt you wasn't tipped with poison. It seems like the other person's main goal wasn't killing you."

"Perhaps," Yin Qie Zi coldly replied and began to retie the bandage.

"Let me help you."

Yin Qie Zi immediately rejected the offer, "No, it's fine."

With his back to everyone, Yin Qie Zi's hair started floating. A lock of hair picked up the bandage and swiftly began wrapping it around the wound. Seeing this, the whole room went quiet. Yin Qie Zi began recounting his story.

"The Leaf Tribe's migration occurred around 20 years ago. Sometime before that happened, the Tree gave birth to me. But I don't remember the exact time I was born. At that time, I was always sitting beneath the Tree. I had no concept of time, and I can only guess that I had sat there for at least 50 years."

Yin Qie Zi heard a gasp behind him, and he involuntarily paused in his story.

"Later, the Leaf Tribe began to migrate. In the beginning, I followed them. I followed them until they reached the ocean. The Leaf Tribe all boarded a ship, but they didn't allow me to get on. In the end, the ships all left. I was the only one left on the beach... They abandoned me."

Owen blurted out, "Why did they abandon you? Aren't you their guardian spirit?"

"I don't know."

"I know why," Mila said quietly.

Yin Qie Zi was taken aback. He turned around, not caring that he was half-naked. He fixed his eyes confusedly at Mila.

"Although this seldom happens, there have definitely been records of this. When a Spirit Tree dies, the Flower it has given birth to will go mad and die. An insane Flower is extremely dangerous. They are capable of controlling plants, so the damage they can inflict is very great."

Upon hearing those words, Yin Qie Zi was shocked to the core. It was the first time he had heard about this. He couldn't speak for a long while. Finally, he said, "I, I definitely went crazy. But I didn't die..." Though back then, he was in so much pain that he'd wanted to die.

Mila replied with an apologetic expression, "I don't know why that would be. In the records, there was not a single case where it mentioned that the Flower lived while the Tree died."

Although Yin Qie Zi didn't know why he was still alive, he at least knew why the Leaf Tribe abandoned him. He would go crazy upon the Tree's death, so the Leaf Tribe refused to bring him along. For the first time, Yin Qie Zi understood their reasons.

However, he didn't know what to think upon hearing this reason. Should he thank them for abandoning him only because they were forced to and not for no reason?

Even though he knew the Leaves were forced into their decision, Yin Qie Zi didn't feel an ounce of happiness. Instead he wanted to cry, but he had no tears. He wanted to laugh manically at the tragedy of his life.

But he couldn't even do that. He couldn't scare Owen or Mila, and ruin his plans for revenge.

"Yin Qie Zi, can you really control plants?" Owen excitedly asked. "I want to see!"

Faced with those words, Yin Qie Zi's heart was seized with pain. On the surface, all he did was quietly reply, "I lost my powers a long time ago. I don't know why it happened and I don't know how to restore them either."

What he didn't say was: if it wasn't for the fact that he lost his power as a Flower, revenge wouldn't be this difficult.

"You lost your powers?" Mila exclaimed. "How can that be?"

Yin Qie Zi shook his head; that was what he wanted to know the most. When he first wanted to take revenge, he found he had lost his powers. The despair he felt then almost drove him to insanity.

"I'll go find out!" Mila pushed her wheelchair along, but found the movement too slow. Though she normally refrained from asking for help, this time she asked Fenny. "Fenny, quickly, take me to the library."

"Of course, Miss."

Seeing that Mila was so rushed to investigate things that didn't even concern her, Yin Qie Zi couldn't help but puzzledly ask, "Why would she—"

He stopped in the middle of his question. He suddenly remembered that he had once asked Litelli some ways on how to handle human relationships. Unfortunately, Litelli wasn't someone who closely followed proper etiquette. All he had told Yin Qie Zi was to be cautious when it came to dealing with girls, especially when the topic was about relationships between men and women. If he didn't have to talk about it, he should avoid it.

If he asked the girl's brother about why she cared about him, the question would not only pull in relationships with girls but also relationships between men and women. It did seem like not needing the answer meant he shouldn't ask the question. Although, in reality, it wasn't like he was an actual man.

Owen shrugged. He had originally wanted to put a hand on Yin Qie Zi's shoulder, but when Owen saw that the other's hair draped over his entire shoulder, he pulled his hand back. He then sternly said, "All right! Since Mila left, let's talk about the main problem here."

"The main problem?" Yin Qie Zi asked, a little bewildered.

"That assassin yesterday, who is he?"

Yin Qie Zi was startled, but then coldly said, "That does not concern you."

Owen's face stiffened up, but he had known Yin Qie Zi for a year; just that wasn't enough to make him give up. He indignantly growled at Yin Qie Zi, "He hurt my friend. Of course it concerns me!"

Friend...

Yin Qie Zi stared. He turned his head away and maintained his cold attitude. "Even then, it still doesn't concern you."

Seeing Yin Qie Zi acting so distant, Owen became angry. He shouted, "Fine then! I won't intervene in your business. But I refuse to watch my friend get killed in front of my own eyes! Starting today, you're living in my house. You are not allowed to go anywhere without either Yehv or me accompanying you!"

Yin Qie Zi was conflicted. Just moments ago, he thought his plans for revenge were hopeless, but now he was a step closer to achieving it.

When Yin Qie Zi didn't reply, Owen thought he was against the idea. Owen immediately sternly added, "I am very serious about this! Even if I agree to let you go home, I can't promise Mila will allow the same thing! She's worried about you!"

Mila was worried about him? No matter the reason, it was a great opportunity to get closer to Mila.

Yin Qie Zi considered it, and said, "I want my servant here, and also my sword."

When Litelli walked into the room, he exclaimed, "Wow, those are some heavy injuries." That one sentence made Yin Qie Zi wonder if he made the right choice in calling Litelli here.

However, he didn't have the option of being picky. The wound on his left shoulder needed time to heal, but there were pressing things he needed to take care of. If he was taking risks to live in this house, the security might become even tighter. It would be hard to get an opportunity alone with Mila.

After making sure there wasn't anyone else hiding in the room, Litelli took off the veil that covered his face. He took off his cloak and the sword-case he had strapped to his back. He put the case on the bed.

Litelli was very thin and short. He was shorter by half a head when compared to Yin Qie Zi, who was only 170 centimeters. Even then, he couldn't really be called short... Among his race, he was already considered tall.

Litelli belonged to the Servile Spirits Tribe. The members of his tribe were wanderers. They wandered their whole life searching for physical spirits. The unique tribe's only goal in life was to serve those spirits.

Although they were short, the Servile Spirits Tribe had a special characteristic: their skin emitted a faint light. The light was so faint that it could only be seen clearly if there was complete darkness. The color of light was also different for each individual, and depended on the kind of spirit they served.

It was daytime right now, and the light in the room was extremely bright. In theory, the light Litelli's skin emitted shouldn't be visible. However, in reality, the light around him was very prominent... Perhaps it wasn't correct to call it a light; it was more like a thick black fog that wrapped around his body.

Litelli liked the unique black light that covered him, which was why he decided to serve Yin Qie Zi, the cause of this particular color. It didn't matter if he had already lost his powers. At least, that's what Litelli told him. Yin Qie Zi never quite believed in those words, but he couldn't find a better reason for why Litelli stuck around him.

"I brought your sword. But why did I have to personally bring it over?" Litelli tilted his head, and curiously said, "Master, you're injured. And by law, as the servant, I should be attending to you. However, you don't like people touching you at all. Even if I tried, there would be nothing for me to do. Not to mention, I can't even heal wounds. In the end, what did you call me here for?"

"I want you to go into town and find a man with a scar on his left eye."

"Aha—" Litelli deliberately dragged out the last syllable. He sounded quite excited. "So he came to find you personally? Looks like he's not a weakling! He even managed to injure you after all. But... what are you going to do when I find him? With you injured like this, you can't possibly go and attempt to kill him, right? Oh! Or is it that you want *me* to kill him? That won't work! We've already talked about this. You can order me to do anything, anything but killing!"

After listening to Litelli's long-winded speech, Yin Qie Zi once again questioned his decision to call him over. Well, it didn't matter if his decision was right or wrong, Litelli always came. Yin Qie Zi sighed, and said, "I know. I only want you to tell him something."

"Oh?"

Yin Qie Zi took a deep breath, "Tell him that I'm in the middle of getting revenge. After I'm finished here, I will go find him. He can take his revenge on me then."

Litelli couldn't resist asking, "If you word it like that, it's as if you know him—"

"Don't ask!" Yin Qie Zi interrupted him and coldly said, "When you said you wanted to follow me, I gave you three rules."

"Don't ask questions. Don't intervene in your business. If you tell me to get lost, I have to get lost. I know, I remember. I'll follow them, you don't have to remind me!" Litelli smoothly recited, and then continued speaking, "However, I have something I want to tell you. But you said not to intervene in your business, so do I tell you or not? This is a very difficult choice! Don't you agree?"

"You have something to tell me?" Yin Qie Zi frowned, and asked, "You or your tribe?"

The Litelli he knew usually wasn't someone who would take the initiative and do something. Whenever he did, it was always because he found something amusing and wanted to add fuel to the fire.

What Litelli considered amusing was always the opposite of what everyone else thought. What he found amusing, other people always found unpleasant.

"Of course it's me." Litelli then said in a mocking voice, "Master, it's enough that you don't have your powers anymore. Now your ears aren't working either?"

Yin Qie Zi only coldly stared at him, "If you have something to say then say it!"

"Master, do you know of the peace treaty Zhan Yan signed with the Danya People 20 years ago?"

"I do," Yin Qie Zi quietly replied.

"In the peace treaty, there's a line that says that every year, both sides have to exchange a gift as a symbol of peace. This way, both sides can confirm that the other still wants peace. This time, the gift exchanging ceremony is just 10 days away!"

Litelli then exaggeratedly sighed, "According to my sources! The Danya People's gift is the typical big pile of special spirits and gems."

Yin Qie Zi listened indifferently, he didn't care about this sort of news. Litelli understood him and knew that he didn't have any interest in them. So he wouldn't talk about them without a reason. The point to all this was definitely coming up.

Litelli smiled widely and asked, "Master, do you know what Zhan Yan is bringing?"

"I don't know," Yin Qie Zi quietly replied.

The gift had to be something he was interested in; otherwise Litelli wouldn't especially tell him. He was slightly interested in the answer; the only problem was that Litelli had an eccentric personality. The more people wanted to know, the more he would tease them. So the best way to get an answer out of him was to act indifferent.

Although Yin Qie Zi was acting disinterested, Litelli knew once he said his answer, the former would definitely become interested. With slightly malicious tone, he declared, "The gift is ten Leaf slaves."

Yin Qie Zi opened his eyes widely and lightly said, "How is that possible? The Leaf Tribe has all migrated to Jun De."

Litelli shrugged and said, "The Human Tribe and the Danya Tribe were always interested in having Leaf slaves. But the Leaves are a self-sufficient tribe; they almost never

come out of the forest. It's not easy for the Human Tribe or the Danya Tribe to capture them. But! Shipbuilding and long-distance sailing are not things you can learn overnight. The Leaves would have had to step out of the forest and exchange materials and knowledge with other tribes. The Leaves that were captured during those times are definitely not small in number! The Leaf Lord was so anxious that he ordered the Leaves to not leave the forest without at least 20 companions."

"Leaf Lord... Who's that?"

Litelli stared and then blurted out, "You don't know?"

Yin Qie Zi shook his head.

"This is unbelievable! Really unbelievable!" Litelli shouted in an exaggerated disbelieving tone, "You're the Guardian Flower, yet you don't even know who the Leaf Lord is? You call yourself a Flower? The Leaf Lord is equivalent to the king of the Human Tribe!"

Hearing that, Yin Qie Zi's face immediately darkened.

"Wait, wait, if it's like that..." Litelli frowned, and muttered, "I seem to have heard the name 'Yin Qie Zi' before."

Yin Qie Zi rolled his eyes. Shouldn't it be more than just heard? Wasn't he sitting in front of him right now?

"Not you! I've heard the name long before I've met you."

Yin Qie Zi was already used to hearing Litelli's disrespectful tone. However, that didn't mean it was the same for everyone else. If Owen were to hear Litelli acting so impertinent even though he was the servant, he would surely explode in anger. Yin Qie Zi couldn't refrain from saying, "I'm not interested in these kinds of things! Why don't you just go do what I've ordered you..."

Suddenly, Litelli let out a loud "aha" and then shouted, "I remember! It's the Leaf Lord's name. That's right! Yin Qie Zi is the Leaf Lord's name! Jeez, you're even using his name. Why did you pretend to be stupid and say you didn't know who the Leaf Lord is?"

Litelli fixed Yin Qie Zi with a questioning stare. With a cold expression, Yin Qie Zi explained clearly to the other that he truly did not know who the Leaf Lord was. Also, he didn't know that he was using the same name as the Leaf Lord's.

"What? You really didn't know?" Litelli softened his voice, and asked, "This can't be just a coincidence, right?"

Yin Qie Zi was silent for a moment. He then said, "I've seen him before, but I didn't know he was the Leaf Lord. I don't even remember what he looks like anymore. Although I do remember he had a head of silvery-purple hair. It was very beautiful."

Yin Qie Zi closed his eyes; he could still see the head of silvery-purple hair in his mind... He then abruptly opened his eyes and growled at his servant, "It doesn't matter who the name 'Yin Qie Zi' belongs to. That's not important! I needed an alias, and that name was the only one

that came to mind at the time. It's as simple as that! Now are you going to do the task I've asked you? If not, you might as well just get lost! And never come back!"

"I will, I will do it! I was only telling you the information that I spent ages to get! Then, I'm going?" Litelli said in an aggrieved tone.

Yin Qie Zi only coldly snorted.

Litelli walked towards the door, but as he was walking he couldn't resist turning around and asking, "But do you really not care about those ten Leaf slaves? You're their Guardian Flower!"

Litelli watched the silent Yin Qie Zi curiously. Even though Litelli was normally impatient, this time, instead of urging the other to reply, he patiently waited for the other's answer.

"I'm not; they've already abandoned me."

After Yin Qie Zi finished speaking, he saw Litelli's face fall slightly with disappointment. The latter picked up his cloak and veil, and after putting them on, he left the room.

Yin Qie Zi gazed at the door for a long while after Litelli left. He turned around, and when he did, he saw the Xialan flowers blooming outside the window. It was the national flower of Zhan Yan. Looking at those flowers, he couldn't resist opening his mouth and calling, "Come, come to my side..."

The Xialan flowers gently shook. Yin Qie Zi was shocked, and a glimmer of hope immediately appeared in his heart. However, no matter how he called them afterwards, the flowers never moved.

Just then, one of the curtains started floating. A gentle breeze blew into the room, bringing with it a wave of cool air.

Was it the wind that moved them earlier? Yin Qie Zi stopped calling the flowers and stood quietly for a moment. He then opened the sword-case that was lying on the bed. An ornately decorated sword lay inside the case. Numerous mysterious and beautiful incantations were etched onto the blade and the hilt. The incantations were not simply for decoration; they each had a purpose. Some could gather spirits, some could increase the sword's speed, and others could increase the speed of chain cutting. Besides the incantations, the cold and sharp ends of the double-edged sword showed that it wasn't just a piece of decoration.

Holding up the sword, Yin Qie Zi picked up the greasing cloth from the case. He began oiling the blade, carefully maintaining its sharpness.

"Yin Qie Zi," Owen knocked the door open, an urgent expression on his face. When he saw the sword in Yin Qie Zi's hands though, all thoughts flew out the window. Instead, he kept showering praise after praise about the sword, "Wow! That is one beautiful sword. Where'd you get it?"

"Nightclaw," Yin Qie Zi said as he continued wiping the blade. "He... gave me the sword, as one of the conditions for not killing him."

"Nightclaw? Is that someone's name?" Owen questioned.

"No, it's a physical spirit... Forget it."

Just by looking at Owen, Yin Qie Zi knew that the other didn't know much about physical spirits. He was too lazy to explain, so he only shook his head and said, "It's something that happened a long time ago. I still had my powers then. I was able to defeat another physical spirit, and got this sword in return."

"If you say it like that, then the other spirit must be extremely strong?" As a spiritmancer, Owen couldn't help wanting to compare notes with the other.

Yin Qie Zi quietly replied, "If I meet Nightclaw now, I would probably be killed in a flash."

Owen was shocked and quickly asked, "He won't come to Qifeng just to kill you, right? Ah... It can't be that he was the assassin from last time?"

Hearing those words, Yin Qie Zi immediately snapped, "If that was him, then I would be dead! I wouldn't even be here listening to you spout idiotic theories. Moreover, if he really came, it wouldn't be just my problem; it would also be His Majesty the King's problem! That guy always has a pack of 50 beasts around him."

"Oh, so he isn't human." Owen awkwardly scratched his face.

Yin Qie Zi felt he overreacted a little. No matter what, Owen was only worried about him. He silently handed Owen the sword in his hands. "The wound on my shoulder is making this difficult. You can help me grease it."

Owen's eyes immediately brightened and shouted, "Definitely!"

Since Owen was wiping the sword, Yin Qie Zi had nothing to do. He moved to sit on the bed, and after a while, he asked, "Oh right, what were you going to say when you came in?"

"... Ah!"

After being prompted, Owen finally remembered what he came for. He quickly said, "Right, Mila told me to come here to warn you."

"Warn me?" Yin Qie Zi was taken aback.

"Well, it's not really a warning... Anyways... Uh, the peace offering the Country of Zhan Yan is giving to the Danya People this year is..." Owen spoke somewhat haltingly.

"Ten Leaf slaves. My servant already told me." Yin Qie Zi quietly continued Owen's sentence.

Owen awkwardly smiled, and quickly relayed what he was going to say. "Mila told me to tell you that, no matter what, you can't attempt to rescue those ten Leaf slaves. Errors are not allowed in the peace ceremony between our country and the Danya People. Due to that, the security is extremely tight for those slaves. It's not possible to rescue them!"

"Don't call them slaves!"

Owen was surprised, but Yin Qie Zi quickly calmed down. In a steady voice, Yin Qie Zi said, "Don't worry, I won't rescue them. They abandoned me, so how can they expect me to go rescue them? Don't you agree?"

Owen stared blankly at the other. He then forcefully nodded. "You're right."

Chapter Ten

A Name Returned, A Past Forever Lost...Gong Hua

By that point, it was difficult for me to remember the name Yin Qie Zi.

Why did I impulsively choose Yin Qie Zi as a fake name?

Why did I decide to use silvery-purple hair as a disguise?

Perhaps, I was still ignorantly following the line, the same path from the very beginning.

— Gong Hua

The next few days passed calmly. Maybe it was because Mila still wasn't sure whether Yin Qie Zi was planning to save the Leaves, but she kept following him around and asking him to accompany her.

Despite that, Yin Qie Zi still felt free to do whatever he wanted, especially since many of his interests coincided with Mila's. The two of them were particularly interested in spirit elixirs. Because Mila had never found a spirit binder to be her teacher, she knew only theories and not the practical methods.

"Are you fine with not being my teacher?" Mila asked worriedly. "Spirit binders can only pass on their knowledge to their students, right?"

Yin Qie Zi immediately clarified in a serious tone, "I don't need students, and I'm not actually teaching you, either. I'm just giving you a birthday present."

Mila broke out in laughter and did not mention the subject again.

The most common thing the two of them did together was to silently read in the library. They researched on the Leaf Tribe and tried to find out the reason Yin Qie Zi lost his powers.

There was one hobby of Mila's that Yin Qie Zi was not fond of—flower arrangement. She soon realized this, and decided to have Yin Qie Zi push her to the garden so they could look at and appreciate the flowers instead. Sometimes, Yin Qie Zi would even perform swordplay for her to watch.

Everything proceeded smoothly, other than the fact that Fenny was constantly with them. Yin Qie Zi wasn't too worried though. He still had time to gain Mila's trust... First he had to wait for Owen to drink the red potion before he could start on his plan.

He had to finish them both off at the same time. If anything happened to one of them, the other would be immediately hidden and strictly protected.

"Yin Qie Zi? Yin Qie Zi, are you listening to me?"

Yin Qie Zi snapped back to his senses and saw Mila's doubtful expression. He hurriedly asked, "What is it? Are you tired?"

Mila smiled, "That's not it! What are you thinking?"

"Sorry." Yin Qie Zi answered vaguely. "I was just thinking of a recipe for some spirit medicine."

"As expected of a spirit binder."

Hearing Mila say that, Yin Qie Zi nodded. "Spirit binding is really fun."

As opposed to Spiritmancers, he was honestly interested in this occupation. It wasn't just a lie to bait Owen that he had started making spirit medicine.

"Too bad I'm not suited for spirit binding." Mila faintly smiled. "My spirit vision isn't very good."

Yin Qie Zi nodded, and said directly, "Your spirit-linking ability is strong. You'd be a good fit to become a spirit charmer."

"Sadly, I..." Mila looked down at her legs. The accident happened when she was a young child and she had already accepted the fact that she couldn't be on the road. Still, sometimes she felt regretful.

"Spirit charmers don't have to join into battle. There are many areas where spirit charmers can help out."

Mila smiled, "But none of them need my help."

Yin Qie Zi was speechless. That was right. They couldn't have the daughter of a member of nobility transport things around or build houses, could they?

"Learning spirit-binding in itself is very enjoyable. There's no need to put it to use!" Mila was fairly optimistic. "Being able to learn the things I want to learn. That's already many times better than other girls in noble families! Dad really spoils me... Even though it's mainly because of my legs, he always thinks he didn't protect me well enough. He keeps spoiling me, protecting me..."

Reaching that point, Mila complained a bit daughterly, "But he's honestly too strict. There's always a pile of soldiers and bodyguards wherever I go. It's the same even at home. It's really tiring to have someone watching over you at every moment! I have to keep holding this noble lady façade."

You should thank him for his strictness. If it wasn't for his tight protection, both you and Owen would have died by my hands already!

Yin Qie Zi grinned lightly, "There's no helping it. You're his only daughter!"

"Owen is also Dad's only son! Then again, Dad is very strict on Owen as well." Mila forced a smile, then spoke suddenly as having remembered something. "Oh, right. Thank you for the costly gift you gave Owen. He was really happy."

Yin Qie Zi responded plainly, "It's not all that precious. Owen must have received even more costly gifts."

Mila shook her head, explaining, "Someone gave an elaborate gift to Owen once, but Dad yelled at him and returned the gift on the spot. From then on, not many people dared to give him any gifts. On the other hand, mine became more and more costly and expensive."

Probably because Warlord Paladin's love for his daughter had been ringing louder and louder, Yin Qie Zi thought to himself.

"Owen never said anything about this..., but I know he still cares about it a little." Mila clasped her hands and begged, "So would you please, give him a birthday present every year from now on?"

Next year... Yin Qie Zi simply replied with, "Mm."

"That's great!" Mila happily said, and then turned to ask Fenny, "Fenny, is it time for dinner?"

Fenny quickly replied, "The servants haven't called us yet, so I'm afraid it'll be little longer. Miss, how about having Mr. Yin Qie Zi take you for a walk around the gardens to whittle away the time?"

Without waiting for Mila's reply, Yin Qie Zi nodded, "Let's go then."

The two quietly walked through the gardens, though only one of them was actually walking. Fenny followed after them, but she was considerate to keep three steps behind.

So they trust me enough to stay three steps away? Inwardly, Yin Qie Zi couldn't help but give a faint smile.

When Yin Qie Zi pushed Mila's wheelchair under a tree, he suddenly stopped. He stood quietly in the tree's shade and enjoyed the coolness of the air.

Mila didn't find this strange; she knew Yin Qie Zi liked to read while sitting under a tree. It had to do with the fact that he was a Flower, for Flowers were the children of Trees. She understandingly suggested, "Let's take a rest here!"

Yin Qie Zi nodded. After making sure Mila's wheelchair was properly parked, he took his usual spot on the ground. When he raised his head, he saw Mila looking him, eyes filled with expectation. Yin Qie Zi hesitated and asked, "What is it?"

"Can I sit together with you on the ground?" Mila asked with longing in her voice.

Yin Qie Zi paused and looked towards Fenny, but the latter merely blinked at him innocently. Fenny then said, "Mr. Yin Qie Zi, you can't possibly be expecting a weak and delicate girl like myself to lift Miss out of the wheelchair, right?"

A weak and delicate girl...?

Yin Qie Zi fixed Fenny with a suspicious stare. But the latter continued acting weak, pretending that it had been someone else who had deflected the assassin's knife with a sword last time.

Although girls belonging to the nobility couldn't easily be touched, if it was Mila's own request, then there shouldn't be any problems, right? Yin Qie Zi didn't dwell too much on it. He stood up, lifted Mila from the wheelchair, and placed her onto the ground. He even thoughtfully chose a comfortable place, allowing her to rest against the tree's trunk and roots.

Mila smiled faintly, "Even though you can use a sword, you look very thin and weak. You don't have the appearance of someone with great strength."

Yin Qie Zi sat down. When he heard those words he smiled, "I'm not human, remember?"

"Ah..."

Mila deliberately exaggerated her sudden realization, making the two of them laugh.

"Is it strange? I'm a Flower; I'm..." Yin Qie Zi paused, and then said, "I'm a physical spirit."

Hearing this, Mila turned to look at him. She appeared somewhat hesitant, but still opened her mouth to speak. "Yin Qie Zi, I couldn't find the reason as to why you lost your powers in our library. However, I've asked Edward to search for books on it in the royal library... Don't worry! I didn't tell him anything about you. Besides, I've always been interested in the Leaf Tribe. He won't suspect a thing!"

Upon hearing those words, Yin Qie Zi finally regained his calm. He had thought he would be forced to take action right then and there.

Seeing that Yin Qie Zi had calmed down, Mila let out a breath, and continued speaking.

"Edward couldn't find any more information about the Leaf Tribe's Guardian Flower. There was a book, however, that talked about the existence of physical spirits. The book described physical spirits to be mighty in power. If one were to rampage about recklessly, they would definitely cause devastating destruction. But fortunately, that sort of destruction has never happened before. This is because there's always a purpose to the existence of physical spirits. It could even be said that they exist purely because of that purpose. Due to this, they would not easily stray away from the path of their purpose. But when they do..."

Mila saw the sudden change in Yin Qie Zi's expression. She paused and chewed on her bottom lip. She knew that the words she was about to say would hurt Yin Qie Zi, so she was afraid to speak them. But since Yin Qie Zi already had an idea of what she was going to say, there would be no point if she didn't finish her words. So, Mila opened her mouth and finished her sentence.

Faced with Mila's worried expression, Yin Qie Zi only gave a faint smile.

From the outset, there was no purpose for an abandoned Flower.

Looking at Yin Qie Zi's composed face, Mila finally gathered the courage and carefully went on. "As far as I know, the purpose of a Flower is to protect the members of the Leaf Tribe... Yin Qie Zi, when you lost your powers, did you try to use it for something other than protection? So much that it could be considered the complete opposite of protecting?"

Yin Qie Zi stayed quiet for a moment, but reluctantly spoke afterwards, "I don't think that's the reason... Long before I lost my powers, I had already been using it for 'non-protecting' purposes."

Mila gave a blank stare, but quickly replied, "Oh! So that's how it is. Then you couldn't have lost your powers because of that. We'll keep searching then!"

"All right."

"Yin Qie Zi..." Mila hesitated, but went on. "The Danya People who're here for the peace offering have already arrived. In two days, they will return to the Continent of Xiasha together with the offering. Those Leaves... Do you want to see them once before they are taken away? Perhaps Owen and Edward can take you there."

"No, they might expose my identity if I go. If that happened, it would be a great problem for me." Yin Qie Zi evenly replied. "I've lived amongst humans for a long time now. I enjoy these peaceful days."

"Yes, passing your days peacefully truly is great!"

After Mila finished speaking, the two of them stopped conversing. But the atmosphere wasn't filled with awkward silence; instead, it was extremely comfortable and relaxing. Although the day was stifling hot, a cool breeze continuously blew under the tree. While it wasn't yet time for the garden to be filled with flowers, there were still many of them swaying amid the abundant green leaves.

The color of sunflowers suddenly blew past Yin Qie Zi's vision. He puzzledly turned his head to look. It turned out to be strands of Mila's hair that had been blown loose by the wind. Yin Qie Zi unconsciously reached out a hand and caught the wisps of hair in his fingers. He then tucked the loose strands neatly behind Mila's ear, completely forgetting how inappropriate an act it was.

However, Mila didn't say anything. She merely reached out to touch Yin Qie Zi's braid. "Your hair color truly is unique," She praised.

When Yin Qie Zi felt the fingers on his braid, he reacted. "Don't touch it!" He cried out in alarm.

"Huh?" Mila quickly withdrew her hand. She then exclaimed, "Ah! Sorry, I heard from Owen that you dislike people touching your hair. But I forgot in the moment..."

Yin Qie Zi blushed and said quietly, "Don't worry about it."

Mila was a little bewildered at Yin Qie Zi's abnormal reaction. On the other hand, Yin Qie Zi felt a little awkward. Since Mila already knew he was a Flower, there was no harm in telling her about the peculiarities of his hair. But just then, she had touched his braid. If he suddenly told her that his hair was capable of having sensations... It probably wouldn't be good.

At that moment, Mila let out a surprised cry. "Who's that?"

Yin Qie Zi raised his head. The person he saw had his entire body hidden underneath a cloak. His face was even covered with a veil. "That's my servant, Litelli."

Litelli walked all the way in front of them and stood still.

Seeing this, Mila understandingly said, "I think dinner's almost ready. I'll go in first. Fenny."

The "weak and delicate" Fenny came over and effortlessly lifted Mila, placed her down in the wheelchair, and pushed her out of the garden.

Yin Qie Zi wordlessly watched mistress and servant leave. He then turned around and asked Litelli, "Did you find him?"

"No, I wasn't able to." Litelli curled his lip and reluctantly said. "He's probably lying low in some special hiding place of his. There is no one I cannot find in this city! Give me a little bit more time. Even if he's hiding in the royal palace, I'll definitely drag him out!"

Yin Qie Zi pondered for a moment, and said, "You can search for him again tomorrow."

"You have another task for me?" Litelli asked knowingly.

"No, I don't want you to do anything." Yin Qie Zi pulled out a jar of spirit medicine from his clothes. "Just drink this jar of hair dye medicine, and obediently go sleep on the bed."

"You want me to pretend to be you? Then, where are you going?" Litelli knew he was in trouble the moment he asked that question. Yin Qie Zi wasn't someone who liked to answer questions.

As expected, Yin Qie Zi did not reply. He merely tossed the jar of medicine to Litelli and left the garden.

The moon was bright that night. The light cast down upon the grey imperial palace of Zhan Yan, making it appear like a luminous silver castle.

It was already late into the night. The inside of the castle was quiet and solemn. There were only guards patrolling the castle grounds, loyally doing their duty and preventing evildoers from entering and harming the royal family.

Two soldiers dressed in armor patrolled the castle's inner walls. When they passed the sewer mouth, one of them, out of the corner of his eye, spied a shadow moving beneath the water. He stopped and said suspiciously to his companion, "There's something in the water!"

The other soldier replied, "It's probably fish. The sewer is filled to the brim with water. Plus, it's so dark inside that you wouldn't be able to tell which direction you're going. If someone went in, they would only drown. It's impossible for them to swim in from the outside. There's no way anyone could come in that way."

"I see," the other soldier said in realization.

"Let's go and check somewhere else."

"Yes."

The soldiers' voices grew farther and farther away. At that moment, a shadow rose from the depth of the water. Without a splash, the shadow quickly clambered onto the ground.

The shadow looked helplessly at the moon that hung high in the sky. The sky was cloudless and bright with moonlight. There was no hope that the moonlight would weaken. He could only hide himself by carefully utilizing all sorts of shadows. In addition, he had to avoid

important places, such as the building where the royal family stayed. It was the most heavily guarded structure within the castle.

Nevertheless, the shadow's target wasn't the high-classed royalty. Instead, he was focused on the bunch locked up in the prison.

The prison was also probably heavily guarded, but he didn't intend on saving anyone. He only wanted to take a look inside. The difficulty of this act was significantly lower than attempting to save the prisoners.

The shadow spent a long time circling the prison walls searching for a window, almost bumping into guards several times. His heart trembled with fear, so much that he wanted to turn around and leave. But just then, he finally found what he was looking for.

There was only one window on any of the walls, a tiny window that even children couldn't crawl out of.

The light inside the prison was dim. Fortunately, the moonlight was more than sufficient for him to see. He could make out several people inside... No, several Leaves.

Unconsciously, the shadow leaned closer toward the window. Even though it was extremely dangerous, he wanted to get a clearer look at the Leaves.

There were both men and women inside, with a great variety of hair color—blue, gold, purple. But none of them had a head of silvery-purple hair.

The shadow gave a self-deprecating smile. How could the grand Leaf Lord be caught and end up as a slave?

It was time for him to leave... The shadow wrinkled his brow. He couldn't resist the urge to peer into the small window one last time.

The Leaves sat or lay quietly inside the prison cell. Most of them were asleep; the few awake stared blankly into space. They looked helpless and utterly lifeless.

It was a very strange scene. In the shadow's memory, it was very rare for Leaves to display such vacant expressions.

Seeing the emptiness on the Leaves' faces made him uncomfortable. He didn't want to look at them anymore and turned to leave. When he had just taken a few steps, however, a voice suddenly came from the side.

"I wasn't sure you would come, since I thought that you might be scared of entering the palace. Although you lost your powers to manipulate plants, you still count as a fairly strong spiritmancer. But even then, isn't it insensible for you to infiltrate the royal palace?"

The shadow's heart skipped a beat. This voice belonged to the assassin who injured his left shoulder!

He turned around to look, but couldn't find the other's figure. In the darkness, however, there was a pair of glowing eyes.

He had lost the ability to manipulate plants... No, it was more accurate to say that he had lost the power to link spirits. He was still passable at breaking chains. Besides that, he still

had his exceptionally good spirit vision. The occupation that suited him the most right now would be that of a spirit binder.

But a spirit binder had almost no fighting ability. To achieve his revenge, he needed fighting power. So in the end, he chose to be a spiritmancer. However, his body type wasn't suited to practicing martial arts. To make up for this, he had spent 20 years before finally reaching where he was today.

But it simply was not enough. When faced with the power and authority of the Warlord Paladin, he was still insignificant.

Right now, with his injury, he couldn't even beat one human!

The shadow turned, even if he had to deal with flying daggers, he had to escape. He couldn't die here.

"Don't run away!" The assassin coldly yelled out. "I know you are living at the Warlord's residence. And I bet you don't want him to know you are a Flower, am I right?"

Hearing this, the shadow stopped in his steps. If he were to lose the chance to take his revenge, then he preferred to be killed by the hands of the man standing behind him. With that thought in mind, the shadow turned around.

The man also stepped out of the darkness. He had changed after all this time. The corners of his lips were lifted in a frivolous smile, but the look in his eyes was the complete opposite. There was a deep hatred in his eyes. The left eye that carried the scar looked especially cold.

The man lightly smiled, and playfully said, "Don't worry; I'm the only one here right now. We can have a nice long chat, without disturbing anyone. After all, we haven't met in such a long time. Why don't you take off your mask? I'm not used to talking to faceless people."

Without any complaints, the shadow took off the mask that covered his whole head; silvery-purple hair flowed out like a torrent of water.

"That hair color really doesn't suit you. Black and blood red are colors that fit you most." The man lazily commented.

Yin Qie Zi was silent, then lightly said, "You... Are you he?"

"He? Which he are you referring to?" The man said with a cynical smile, even though he already knew the answer.

Yin Qie Zi stayed quiet. Finally, he opened his mouth and softly called out the name he hadn't said in years.

"Cas... Are you Cas?"

The man smiled and idly replied, "Yes, that is my name, Zhan · Cas · Tershiziel. Once, you even disliked it because it was too long."

It really was Cas.

Although he had already guessed it, Yin Qie Zi couldn't help but feel surprised. He had never thought he would meet Cas again. So many years had passed... He had carried the fear that Cas had long died under his own hands.

After thinking a bit, Yin Qie Zi spoke, "Cas, wait for a while. After I take my revenge, I'll come and find you... You can settle your score with me then."

"Settle my score with you? You think I want to kill you? Why would that be? You're all that I have left. My Gong Hua... My enemy!"

Cas turned his face upwards and laughed, a crazy and violent laugh. Suddenly, he stopped, stepped forward, and grabbed a fistful of the other's collar. He pulled Yin Qie Zi toward him, and stared at the latter with chilling eyes.

"My cute, baby Gong Hua, killing you would be letting you off easy! You killed my whole family. You couldn't even spare the one brother I had left. You even raised your hand to hurt me and then just turned around and left... I spent 20 years looking for you!"

I didn't mean to hurt you. I wanted to protect you!

Yin Qie Zi's mouth moved, but he refrained from speaking. Even if there was one less crime to his head, the situation wouldn't change.

"Everything about you is a lie! Do you remember when you agreed to marry me? Hahaha! Even your gender is a lie!"

"I didn't understand anything at the time!" Yin Qie Zi couldn't help explaining. "I didn't mean to lie to you... No, I never lied to you!"

Cas growled, "You don't even need to lie! Your whole existence is a lie! Pretending to be an innocent girl and deceiving everyone so much that they were wrapped around your finger. In the end, all of them died because of you! Mila died, my brother died, and what about Owen who left with you? I bet he's dead too, am I right?"

Yin Qie Zi couldn't even finish his explanation, but there was no way for him to explain. A tear fell silently onto his cheek.

"You are a lie, but I won't break my promise."

Seeing the other's tears, Cas smiled. He reached out a hand and wiped the tear off of Yin Qie Zi's face. Then lovingly, as if whispering to a lover, he uttered the most malicious words.

"Do you remember? I once promised you that I would never leave you. I have no plans to go back on that promise. So I'm going to stay with you for the rest of your life. I'm going to make your life a living hell. As repayment for your sins, I will make you experience suffering of the greatest kind every second of your days."

Yin Qie Zi was silent upon hearing those words.

Cas snorted when he saw that the other did not plan on replying. He then brusquely commanded, "Now, tell me everything! After you and Owen left that year, exactly what happened?"

"That doesn't concern you." Yin Qie Zi didn't want to talk about that time. He didn't even want to remember it.

"Of course it concerns me; only after understanding you completely will I know what makes you suffer the most. Talk! Perhaps after you do, I'll consider letting you take revenge."

Seeing Cas act like a master, Yin Qie Zi couldn't help but give a bitter laugh. He now understood how Litelli felt whenever he harshly ordered the latter about. The difference was that Litelli voluntarily became his servant and could leave any time he wished. In contrast, Yin Qie Zi wasn't given any other choice but to submit.

Since the beginning, he had never been given any choices.

"Back then, Owen took me and we escaped, but wanted posters of us quickly went up. I wanted to do as Mila said and leave the country, but Owen didn't want to leave Zhan Yan. Instead, he brought me to his cousin West's place to ask for his help."

Cas let loose an excited laugh, "West the Warlord Paladin? You went to him for help, but then he turned into your object of revenge? Don't tell me he wanted to kill his own cousin Owen?"

"No, the person he wants to kill is me."

"Everybody wants to kill you."

Cas gave a cruel smile when he saw Yin Qie Zi's stricken expression. "How could this be, baby Gong Hua? Just by looking at you, I can tell you are very lovable. What did you do to provoke West?"

Yin Qie Zi was taciturn, but when he lifted his head to look at Cas, a hint of a smile was on his face.

"I helped him kill over ten thousand people from the Danya tribe."

Cas...

Since long ago, I've already been living in hell.

Afterword

Originally, I had wanted for *Gong Hua* to be a trilogy, only three novels. But after I had written around 70 thousand words of the first novel, I found that I had only gotten through a third of the plot I had planned. Because of this, I finally abandoned my plan to end the story in three books.

Unfathomably, *Gong Hua* had changed into a long story spanning six books¹⁹, with each book ranging around 100 thousand words. Every two books will make up one part of the trilogy, and will tell the same story. There will be, however, a small ending of sorts between the different parts of the trilogy. At least, that is how I planned it so far.

It can still be considered as a trilogy, right?

I hope I won't spill anything about the plot in the rest of my afterword.

Gong Hua is a very slow-moving story; it will take time before we reach the main point of the plot. The writing style I'm using for *Gong Hua* is different from any of the ones I've employed before, where I'd get straight to the point of the story. If I have to compare them, the style in *Gong Hua* is somewhat similar to the one I used for my previous work, *Kill No More*.

However, the world of *Gong Hua* is much more complete than the one I made for *Kill No More* (after all, even a map was drawn for *Gong Hua*). And because I wanted to clearly describe the things I visualized, I wrote more than I expected, causing my word explosion.

From beginning to end, *Gong Hua* is a work that rebels against everything I've wrote before. This time, I'm resisting my own urges²⁰.

Yu Wo's²¹ books are always described to be extremely funny, and that's it. There is a strong emphasis on character portrayals, which is why the settings of the stories are often incomplete in comparison...

So in writing *Gong Hua* this time, I put in so many details about the world that even I myself found it too much. Every time, I had to make sure I wrote the necessary parts while preventing myself from tossing out too long of a chapter (because it would be too hard for me to remember the details). Even then, I managed to write out a rather complete description of the world I envisioned. It should be very easy for everyone to find specific passages and references in the story.

¹⁹ The series is already finished with four volumes.

²⁰ Written as 御我 (Yu Wo), same as the author's name. The meaning of the name is about resisting yourself, hence, why Yu Wo used it here.

²¹ Here, the authors uses 御我 as her name.

But I'll still have to remind everyone what physical spirits are and what spirit charmers do later on in the story...

Furthermore, I have to incorporate these sorts of explanations in-between character dialogues, rather than writing it straight out in the narration. I dislike that way of writing out explanations.

Adding all these up, writing *Gong Hua* seriously makes me feel like my head will explode.

However, as I saw Sisha slowly taking on shape... Ah, I felt somewhat akin to God then.

It was very pleasant.

Other parts that rebel against what I've previously written: The circumstances surrounding Gong Hua's character are rather tragic; practically the moment he shows up, he kills off an entire town of people.

The theme of the first book is revenge...

Other than that, I wrote about love...

In conclusion: the rebellious attitude I have towards myself is a disease beyond cure.

But because of this disease, I can try out many different types of things, even things I'm not familiar with.

Perhaps I am better at describing and writing about things I'm used to. But I want to change the unfamiliar things into things I am familiar with. With this, the contents of my novels can become more enriching and diverse.

I hope I will keep on improving in the future.

I also hope that everyone will accept an unusual child like Gong Hua, who is very different from the main characters of my previous works.

Yu Wo

